



# Memorandum

## MONTEREY REGIONAL WASTE MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

Reviewed by W. M. M.  
General Manager

Date 6.8.07

DATE: June 8, 2007  
TO: General Manager  
FROM: Public Education and Recycling Manager  
SUBJECT: Report on Litter and Public Education Activities

### BACKGROUND

An update follows on recent staff activity.

#### State Award for Last Chance Mercantile

Each year the California Resource Recovery Association (CRRA) recognizes award winning diversion programs around the state at their Annual Summer Conference. This year the Last Chance Mercantile (LCM) has been selected to receive the "Pavitra Crimmel Reuse Award" which recognizes special achievement by a private business, government agency, community based organization or school in the reuse of materials. The award is given in honor of the late Ms. Crimmel, a longtime champion of reuse, who co-founded the Recycletown Recycling and Reuse Center in Sonoma County. This year, the LCM has already exceeded the 2006 tonnage (822 tons) of reusable goods diverted from disposal with 839 tons received at the LCM from the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) through March of 2007. The Monterey Regional Waste Management District's (District) commitment to "salvaging" dates from 1953 when the Board approved a motion to "salvage" cardboard from incoming loads of refuse. This award acknowledges the District's commitment to this innovative program and the hard work of LCM staff to steadily increase tonnage diverted and revenues every year for the last ten years. The award will be given at CRRA's 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference and Trade Show July 29 – August 1 in San Pedro, CA.

#### Recycling Grant Updates

The State Department of Conservation (DOC) is accepting proposals to "award a total of \$5 million in grant funds to establish beverage container recycling collection programs that will place source-separated beverage container recycling receptacles in low-income, multifamily housing communities in California". Grants are awarded on a competitive basis. The District is partnering on a regional proposal with the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority (SVSWA), Monterey County, and Ecology Action. Ecology Action will write the grant and serve as project lead. In the District service area, we have identified qualifying "low income" multi-family housing units in the cities of Monterey, Marina, and Seaside. Staff in each of the three cities have been notified of this regional grant proposal. A copy of a letter in support of this regional effort written by William Merry is attached.

The District had previously submitted a "Phase 1 Concept Proposal" to the DOC for a 2007-08 Beverage Container Recycling Grant proposal to help fund the implementation of an on site "buyback" program for beverage containers. We received notice on May 21<sup>st</sup> that our concept has been selected to "compete in Phase 2" of this grant solicitation. The District's proposal requested \$85,000 in grant funds and staff is now working to analyze the costs and revenue potential associated with adding a buyback operation. Phase 2 proposals are due July 13<sup>th</sup>. Should our Phase 2 proposal be funded, staff will provide the board with a recommendation for a buyback center implementation.

### **Staples Adds E-waste Collection**

One of the main themes discussed in “zero waste” circles around the State is “extended producer responsibility” (EPR). The main concept of EPR is that if you make it, or sell it, you should be responsible for the proper recycling of the product. Last week, the office products retailer, Staples, embraced EPR by announcing that they will offer electronic waste collection at their U.S. store locations. Staples will accept all brands of computers, monitors, laptops, printers, faxes, and all-in-one devices at its U.S. stores for a fee of \$10 per large item. Televisions, which Staples does not sell, are not accepted. In California, where consumers pay a \$10 recycling fee on new computer monitors, the Staples fee will be a disincentive to recycle e-waste but in states where no recycling fee is charged, the \$10 fee may meet with more public acceptance. The District accepts e-waste free of charge when dropped off at LCM. As a result of the California advance disposal fee on monitors and televisions, the District is able to have a recycler collect these along with other electronic waste items at no cost to the District.

### **Plastic Foam Packaging Ban Discussed in Pacific Grove**

Staff attended a meeting with representatives from Sustainable Pacific Grove, Surfrider Foundation, and the city manager to discuss a local ban on the use of “Styrofoam” plastic fast food packaging. The city has an ordinance that prohibits such packaging for municipal use that dates to the late 1980’s. Several community members from Sustainable Pacific Grove have come forward to urge that the city adopt an ordinance to prohibit the use of this packaging at city restaurants. All attendees were in agreement that before any ban is brought to the city council for consideration, Sustainable Pacific Grove will work to educate local restaurant owners on alternative and environmentally friendly packaging products and to obtain their buy-in on such a proposal.

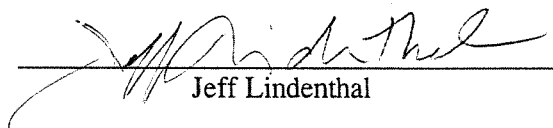
The City of Santa Cruz is also working on a draft Styrofoam Packaging Ban Ordinance with the goal of making their policy available to other cities in the county for adoption. Santa Cruz will conduct an informational meeting on this effort on June 7<sup>th</sup> which District staff will attend.

The use of plastic in consumer packaging, especially Styrofoam and plastic bags, is presently the subject of renewed scrutiny among many California jurisdictions and the State Legislature due to the large volume of these materials that become litter and because extremely low recycling and recovery rates exist for both material types. One proposed bill now in the Assembly, AB 904, would phase out the use of takeout food packaging that cannot be either recycled or composted in the communities where it is distributed. This bill has the potential to reduce the volume of plastic litter in our communities as restaurants switch to environmentally friendly packaging alternatives.

### **Litter Report**

The Monterey Bay Aquarium is staging a 15 minute theatrical performance on the topic of litter and marine pollution this summer titled “Basta Basura! Enough Trash!” This bilingual show will be offered three times each day and will feature professional actors from the Teatro Campesino theatre group in San Jose. The Aquarium approached the District and the SVSWA with a “sponsorship opportunity” to help underwrite the cost of the show. Utilizing funds from our litter abatement budget, the District has agreed to contribute \$2,500 and the SVSWA has agreed to contribute the remaining \$2,500. In return, our sponsorship will be acknowledged on banners at the show site and in the printed guide given to Aquarium visitors. Due to space limitations in the printed guide, the sponsorship will be identified as “sponsored by [www.keepmontereycountyclean.org](http://www.keepmontereycountyclean.org)”. We are hopeful that this will help raise awareness for our litter website and increase traffic. In addition, we have asked the Aquarium to provide a link to the litter website from their website which receives a tremendous volume of traffic in the summer months. We have updated the litter website to highlight the sponsorship partnership created by SVSWA and the District. In 2006, the Aquarium reports that 38,278 Monterey County residents visited the Aquarium in June - August and of those approximately 14% were Hispanic. We look forward to monitoring traffic to our litter website to measure the success of this sponsorship.

The Aquarium reported that their Science Under Sail program has as its main "research" project a Marine Debris Mapping Initiative. They are collecting trash out of the water whenever they can, and taking Global Positioning Systems coordinates so they can map it, also noting what they are collecting and its level of decay (i.e. has it been in the ocean a long time or just come from shore). The number one type of trash they report picking up are the little Styrofoam chowder sample cups that are blowing off the wharf. The Aquarium concludes the Science Under Sail Program by giving each family a cloth tote bag and encouraging them to use it when they go shopping.



Jeff Lindenthal

WILLIAM MERRY, P.E., DEE  
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# MONTEREY REGIONAL WASTE MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

*Home of the Last Chance Mercantile*

June 7, 2007

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Department of Conservation, Division of Recycling  
 Attn: Community Outreach Branch  
 801 K Street, MS 17-01  
 Sacramento, CA 95814-3533

**Re: Monterey Bay Area Regional Multifamily Housing Recycling Project**

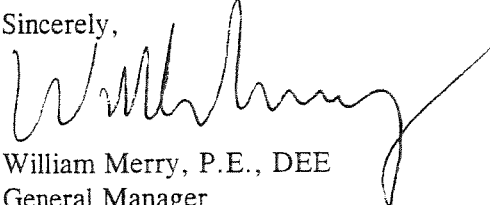
Dear Grant Review Committee:

The Monterey Regional Waste Management District (MRWMD) is pleased to offer this letter of support and partnership with our Monterey Bay Area agency partners and Ecology Action to implement the Monterey Bay Area Regional Multifamily Housing Recycling Project as proposed in the accompanying grant proposal.

The MRWMD is responsible for a wide range of waste management services and diversion programs that support AB 939 compliance in Monterey County. In order to accomplish our recycling and waste reduction goals, the MRWMD is working in cooperation with our member jurisdictions, regional waste haulers, the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority (SVSWA) and the County of Monterey to increase the availability of convenient recycling opportunities throughout the region.

Consistent with these efforts and with the support of our grant partners, the MRWMD is pleased to offer our commitment to the implementation of this innovative recycling project to improve recycling access, convenience, and participation for the significant underserved low-income multifamily housing community in our region.

As a project partner, the MRWMD pledges to commit staff and financial resources during and beyond the grant period in order to ensure long-term sustainability of the program. The MRWMD is grateful for the opportunity to participate in this grant solicitation and looks forward to continuing our partnership with the Department of Conservation. Together, we will expand the opportunities to recycle and increase beverage container diversion.

Sincerely,  
  
 William Merry, P.E., DEE  
 General Manager

THE MONTEREY COUNTY HERALD, FRIDAY, JUNE 1, 2007

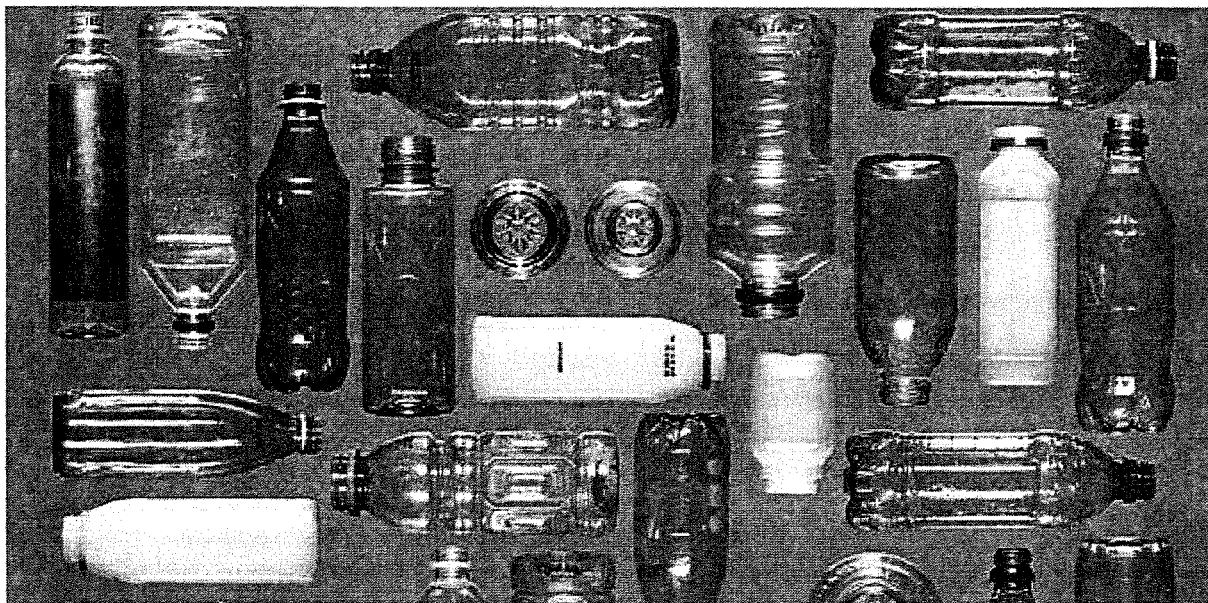
CARMEL

**Waste Management District  
offers virtual tour of plant**

Kimberlee Herring of the Monterey Regional Waste Management District, will offer a virtual tour of the district's Marina facility from 10 to 11 a.m. June 8 at the Carmel Foundation, southeast corner of Eighth Avenue and Lincoln Street.

For reservations, call 624-1588.

# The Unintended Consequences of Hyperhydration



Dwight Eschliman

New York Times  
 By JON MOOALLEM  
 Published: May 27, 2007

It's easy to find, in the mightily expanding iconography of American waste, the monumental (a ziggurat of flattened cars), the sinister (ocher sludge foaming on a riverbank) and the sublime (a plastic bag fluttering in a Japanese maple). The empty bottle and crushed aluminum can are none of these. They are almost too commonplace to notice, too dreary to evoke anything at all. Foundered on a roadside or slumped in a bag of spent Chinese takeout, the can without its Mountain Dew and the bottle without its Bud are unremarkable things. They're just trash: something we once wanted and now can't be bothered with.

Eleven states — California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Oregon and Vermont — give this valueless stuff a value, however. Typically we pay a nickel when purchasing a container and get the nickel back if we return the container for recycling. It's a deposit, a contract binding us to our garbage. Though these days, that nickel may elicit only the faintest twinge of regret as we toss the empty into the trash and rejoin our busy lives. More than three decades since it was first legislated, the transaction that the so-called bottle bill sets in motion — pay a nickel, recoup a nickel — is the same as ever. The world surrounding it, though, is almost unrecognizable.

Oregon passed the country's first deposit law in 1971, and as one native Oregonian told me, "We don't have too many firsts." So in February in Salem, hearings to dust off and modernize the law began with a certain romantic pride. Oregon's speaker of the house called the bottle bill "an Oregon institution" and described tacking toward floating bottles and scooping them out of the Columbia River while learning to sail with his father. The Senate president credited the bottle bill with making him want to become a legislator. "I just think it's part of being an Oregonian, that you return your bottles and cans," he said.

Representative Vicki Berger, a Republican from Salem, introduced herself as "the only living witness to the actual birth of the Oregon bottle bill." Berger, who is largely spearheading the reforms, is the daughter of a fabled citizen-activist, Richard Chambers, who proposed the first bill, a man subsequently described to me as "a voice in the wilderness" and "totally prophetic." Berger called the law "part of our mythology." For others it was a "shining beacon" and "the one bill more than any others that Oregonians identify with."

Never, it seemed, had such a ceremony been made over trash. Except that this same thing has been going on, almost perennially, in state legislatures across the country for decades. Bills to update existing laws or pass one in a non-bottle-bill state typically flail around in committee until, clobbered by the powerful grocery and beverage

industry lobbies or skipped over for sexier environmental issues, they disappear. This year, however, the Oregon campaign, along with similar ones in New York and Connecticut, have gained greater traction.

Bottle bills are still surprisingly good at inspiring recycling and reducing litter. But, though they are idiosyncratic in every state, the vast majority of the laws share one colossal, unanticipated flaw: they place a deposit on beer and carbonated beverages only. The bottle bill's scope, and to some extent the very vision of a more waste-conscious world that first motivated it, has been swiftly trivialized by the ubiquity of bottled water. This year, Americans will drink more than 30 billion single-serving bottles of water. Oregonians will throw out about 170 million empty ones. Those same bottles, filled with something fizzy, would carry nickel deposits.

"That was the stupidest thing we ever did," says a veteran of the original Oregon campaign. The laws were written in a different era, a less health-obsessed one, when drinking out of a bottle or can meant drinking beer or soda. If bottled water, teas, juices and energy drinks existed at all, they were quaintly called "new-age beverages." ("In the late '70s," one bottled-water executive urged me to keep in mind, "no one was putting on little shorts and running in the streets.") Bottled water, Berger says, "is what's truly different from 1971," which is why she and others are battling to expand their bottle bills to include it.

From there, proposals often seek to fix a mess of other unanticipated dysfunctions and complaints. For starters, no state had the foresight to require its nickel deposit be adjusted for inflation. That nickel is now worth about a penny in 1971 terms, and redemption rates have depressed — except in Michigan, the only state with a dime deposit, where the rate remains 97 percent. Other states have tried to move to a dime. What's more, in most states, if we toss the can, or even if we dutifully put it in our curbside recycling, our nickel quietly remains with the beverage-distributing company to which we first paid it. This year, the Bigger Better Bottle Bill campaign in New York is making its sixth attempt to redirect those unclaimed deposits — estimated at \$100 million each year — into a state environmental fund. "It's the people's nickel," says Judith Enck, Governor Spitzer's deputy secretary for the environment.

Opposing such changes are disgruntled bottlers, distributors and grocers. Americans buy about 215 billion beverage containers every year, more than quadruple those bought in 1971. Steadily, these industries have been forced to sacrifice more space, time and money to run shadow businesses that are, as if out of a surrealist novel, haunting reversals of their regular businesses: trucks shuttle from store to store picking up empties; clerks hand customers money for grimy containers of air. Including bottled water would only inundate them further.

By now the players on both sides, in each state, all know one another. They issue reports. They recite dueling statistics. But the debate, wherever it happens to flare up in a given year, is essentially a philosophical one. While recycling advocates rail against society's wastefulness as a solemn problem, so much of that society relies on the freedom to throw things out as a solution to problems. As naïve as it looks, the bottle bill forces the very contemporary environmental question of whether those who sell a product, not to mention those who use it, should be accountable for its mess — and just how accountable, and at what cost. By Day 3 in Salem, one dumbstruck grocer, pressed after his testimony, finally blurted out: "Are we responsible for all the containers and all the garbage we sell?" He meant it as a rhetorical question. But it's precisely the question that, for 36 years, everyone has been getting together to hash out.

### The People's Lobby Against Nonreturnables

Opponents often denigrate the bottle bill as an old antilitter law, ill equipped to do the 21st-century job of recycling. But the ethos behind it was more forward-thinking than is commonly remembered.

Richard Chambers sold plywood production equipment. Before dying of cancer in 1974, he climbed every peak in Oregon and to the highest point in every state. On a Sunday morning in 1968, returning from a walk on the beach near his house in Pacific City, Chambers saw an article in the newspaper that his teenage daughter was reading over breakfast. It described a proposed deposit system in British Columbia. "And he says: 'That's it. That's the answer,'" his daughter, Vicki Berger, told me recently. Immediately, Chambers called a state representative, a young black-sheep Republican named Paul Hanneman. The call woke up Hanneman. Soon the two men were standing near the town's only intersection, grimacing at the mess of broken glass Chambers spotted there on his walk: a typical Saturday night's detritus.

The beverage industry was changing, as were its consumers' expectations. For decades, producing glass bottles was so costly that bottlers operated their own deposit systems to ensure they got them back. Beer usually came in glass "stubbies," each with a deposit of a few cents. A stubby could be returned to any local bottler, regardless of its brand. There it was sterilized, scrubbed clean of its label and refilled. A single container could be repurposed as many as 30 times. But by the '60s, aluminum cans were ubiquitous, and glass bottles were shedding their deposits. The convenience of these new "one way," or disposable, containers was marketed enthusiastically. By 1970, nearly 40 percent of America's packaged soda and 75 percent of its packaged beer came in one-ways.

"We could see the returnables disappearing," Paul Hanneman, now 70 and retired, told me in the house near Pacific City where he has lived since childhood. The morning I visited, he had unearthed 300 copies of letters Chambers sent, often while overseas for business, to strum up support for the bottle bill. Chambers collected hotel stationery, hoping letterhead from Zaire would make his cause look important.

Hanneman first introduced the bottle bill in 1969. The idea — to put an artificial value on what everyone increasingly saw as worthless — was swiftly crushed. "The industry people came down on us like crazy," he said. As convenient as one-ways were for consumers, they also alleviated great hassle and expense for grocers and bottlers. Those businesses themselves were becoming one-way, less hobbled by having to take back empties. Many bottle-washing lines, where containers were sterilized, were already dismantled. Hanneman was accused of trying to turn back the clock, ordering major corporations to jump through so many impracticable hoops in his one, inconsequential state that ultimately the whole industry might collapse. Businesses and unions, normally enemies, sat together on the same side of the hearing room. On the other side, Hanneman told me, "you've got Rich Chambers sitting all by himself": a 6-foot-4, 275-pound man, needlepointing assiduously to calm his nerves. "He'd get so wound up. He'd say, 'If we don't reverse the trend now, nonreturnables, especially cans, are going to be so numerous we'll never beat these people.'"

In 1971, when Hanneman and Chambers reintroduced the bill, modern environmentalism was just forming in the unfocused afterglow of the first Earth Day a year earlier. It was a moment when discussing humankind's negligent stewardship of the planet and simply picking pieces of litter off its surface were both seen as deeply ecological acts. As an outdoorsman, Chambers loathed litter as a blight on the landscape. But he was also fearful of the broader wastefulness it signaled. He kept compulsive files on the resources needed to manufacture aluminum cans. An ad-hoc group called PLAN, the People's Lobby Against Nonreturnables, studied the energy that a deposit program could conserve.

"My father understood fully about resource management," Berger says, but "he was a salesman first." Only by trumpeting the bottle bill as an antilitter measure could Chambers and Hanneman find the support they needed. Fighting litter was straightforward; it felt good. Gov. Tom McCall championed the bill exhaustively, telling the press he would "put a price on the head" of every bottle and can. This time, an unlikely coalition staggered in on Chambers's side of the hearing room. "You had some younger people with longer hair sitting right next to a guy in big overalls from the Linn County Farm Bureau," Hanneman said. "They were from all around the state — some urban, some rural. They hadn't been to the Capitol before and really didn't know what to do. All they knew was that they ought to go there."

Opposition intensified. Before one hearing, a small cavalcade of private jets landed at the Salem airport, carrying various industry representatives from the East Coast. Jerry Powell, who volunteered for Chambers as a graduate student and now edits the trade magazine *Resource Recycling*, says the men came off as bullies and outsiders. For starters, "they called it 'Oregooan,'" Powell says, still irritated. Local businesses meanwhile stepped up with crucial support, particularly five northwest breweries that hoped the bill might handicap the Anheuser-Buschs of the world, however slightly. (Freed from the cost of shipping bottles in two directions, national companies were now outcompeting local ones.) The bottle bill ultimately passed, Powell argues, because of "locals talking to locals." "Incidentally," he adds, "all five of those breweries are out of business now."

Eric A. Goldstein of the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) describes the first bottle bills emerging at a time when nationalizing markets were making goods more affordable and convenient, but also further detaching consumers from their environmental costs. The one-way soda can is only convenient because we can throw it out when we're finished and don't have to worry where it goes. So is the Bic razor, the paper towel, the disposable

camera and the Swiffer mop head. “As significant as the bottle-bill legislation is,” Goldstein says, “the growing movement toward a throwaway society that started in the ’60s and ’70s is an even larger trend.”

Berger told me: “My father envisioned a world where we were overburdened with trash. He wasn’t aiming for recycling in the sense we know it, but recycling in the sense he knew it, which was that the bottle would go back to the bottling plant and get refilled.” (Chambers put a sticker over the toilet in the family’s beach cabin that read: “Rejoice! You’re Refillable!”) “I think his real purpose was to conserve that system” — to preserve the tidy, closed loop the industry was allowing to diffuse. “And in that sense,” Berger said, “the bottle bill was a failure.”

Today a great many of Oregon’s returned glass bottles are trucked to a plant near the Portland airport. There, they accumulate in towering piles. Then they are melted down and made into new bottles.

## The Old Jalopy

Despite the elaborate overhauls first discussed, the updated bottle bill that passed out of the Oregon senate and into the House last month was essentially what Berger called the “just add water” option. It would place a 5-cent deposit on bottled water.

The change is far more complicated and politically ambitious than it sounds, given that grocers, stuck with the bottle bill’s grunt work, have traditionally been opposed to any expansion. Last year, *The Oregonian* reported that, before any changes were even introduced, Joe Gilliam, president of the Northwest Grocery Association, issued this warning to a meeting of stakeholders: “We can sit back and kill bottle bills. We’ve got the money to do it. We’ve got the political know-how to do it.”

Not long ago, Gilliam and I visited a store in northeast Portland together. It was a Fred Meyer, a chain of large-scale retailers. We met at the bottle house, a cement structure resembling a bus terminal near the edge of the parking lot. There, people fed empties into “reverse vending machines,” which scanned the barcodes and issued redemptions. An employee stood by to switch out the bins and hand-count any containers mistakenly rejected. The store fills three trucks with empties every week. Adding water, Gilliam speculated, would at least double that volume. That means twice as many machines in a bottle house twice as big. And if that happens, he said, pacing into the lot with his arms extended, you run into compliance problems with parking, access to public transportation and so on. Some grocers also warn that funneling garbage into grocery stores has health risks. “The bottle bill is basically maxed out on its capacity,” Gilliam said. “They’re going to have to do something far more innovative to make it work at this point.”

Meanwhile, as is the case in most states, Oregon’s beverage distributors — who via the grocers, collect and refund the deposits — claim they are being defrauded. They are refunding nickels for out-of-state containers on which they never collected a deposit in the first place. In Portland, bottles and cans flood in from the nearby suburbs in Washington, a state with no bottle bill. (“*Seinfeld*” fans will remember Kramer driving a mail truck full of empties to the 10-cent Promised Land of Michigan.) A cooperative of Oregon distributors says this fraud almost entirely cancels out, and in some years exceeds, the windfall of unclaimed deposits it gets to keep.

Bottled-water companies claim that, because water is not distributed in strict territories like soda and beer, keeping track of their nickels will be even more difficult. In Maine, one of two states so far to expand its law to include bottled water, Nestlé Waters North America says it handed back \$815,000 more in nickels than it collected last year. (Globally, Nestlé owns 72 different brands of water, including Poland Spring, Deer Park and Arrowhead.) Brian Flaherty, a Nestlé spokesman who has testified in Connecticut and Oregon, told me those states are trying to drag the water business into an already dysfunctional system. They’re trying to “update the old jalopy,” Flaherty said.

The grocery and beverage industries largely advocate relying on curbside recycling instead — the programs by which homeowners set out bins at the ends of their driveways for collection. They argue that running a deposit program — a separate system just for beverage containers — is redundant. It may even be counterproductive. In Connecticut, a recycling contractor warns that placing a deposit on noncarbonated beverages, and thus inspiring

more people to recycle those containers at stores, would divert at least \$900,000 of recyclable material from the curbside bins. Such losses of revenue can threaten the financial viability of the curbside programs altogether.

The rise of municipal curbside recycling is yet another thing the bottle bill's authors couldn't have predicted. Bottle-bill proponents note that nearly half of Americans don't have access to curbside recycling and maintain that it does a poor job of capturing containers commonly consumed away from home, like bottled water. But curbside still has a way of complicating their arguments, or at least of exposing just how stubbornly idealistic their vision actually is. If the goal is to conserve resources, it seems unfair that someone who conscientiously recycles his bottles and cans at the curb rather than at the grocery store loses his nickels regardless. I told this to Betty McLaughlin of the Container Recycling Institute, a tiny nonprofit that serves as a nerve center for bottle-bill advocates. McLaughlin disagreed, categorically. People drive to the grocery store regularly anyway, she said. If they took their empties with them, and if states put deposits on even more products, the volume of curbside material would drop, and the haulers' trucks could make fewer trips. That would result in a net — though small, it seems — reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions.

More important, McLaughlin said, curbside is financed by municipalities; the bottle bill is designed to hold industry accountable for the disposal of its products. This accountability has practical, not just philosophical, benefits: forcing companies to take back their empties has ensured they make their containers recyclable and build markets for the scrap. (It is because of the bottle bill that fleece jackets, mattresses and carpeting are now made from recycled plastic bottles; recycled bottles have become one of the most valuable scrap materials.) Nevertheless, defenses of the bottle bill often boil down to an insistence that the essential rightness of its principle, the idea of producer responsibility, simply outweighs its many other costs and inconveniences — particularly since the bulk of those costs and inconveniences are borne by the industry. That's only just.

Each side of the debate has its own emphatic standards of fairness and efficiency, and the distance between them was evident earlier this month, when, with an expansion seeming almost inevitable in Oregon, Michael Read of the WinCo Foods grocery chain spoke at a second round of hearings, sounding defeated. Read didn't bother preparing testimony, he said, because "all of the cogent arguments where we have good data . . . have unfortunately been largely ignored. No one seems to care about the health issues, sanitation issues, space issues, handling issues, efficiency issues, cost issues." I asked Paul Hanneman how he and Chambers responded to similar objections in 1971, the contentions that the bottle bill would demand calamitous changes to a complex industry. "We said, 'You figure it out,' " Hanneman told me; the state was done paying for those containers as garbage or litter.

In her office one morning, Vicki Berger seemed to share this principled insensitivity. When it comes to bottled water, she said, "when are we going to say enough is enough of this product?" (Berger had previously explained her position on water this way: "The product is zilch! You're buying a friggin' container!") Now she handed me a bottle from a little collection she kept. The brand was called Oregon Rain; its slogan, "Virgin Water Harvested From Oregon Skies." "This is my poster child," she said. "It's laughable." Then to prove this, Berger laughed.

## Water

Singling out bottled water is unfair. All successful products cater to our values, and it may be that, in water, we see our unflattering reflection most clearly. Steve Emery, president of the Oregon-based bottled-water company Earth20, told me, "It's funny that people think if you add a lot of sugar to the water, it's better than just providing water."

Bottled water is invaluable for those without reliably safe drinking water or during disaster relief. But the product thrived only after Americans were accustomed to, even reliant on, buying single servings of soda while on the go — in the convenience stores and little delis the industry calls "immediate consumption channels." This year, Americans will drink more than nine billion gallons of bottled water, nearly all of it from polyethylene terephthalate, or PET, plastic bottles. Water, together with other nonfizzy drinks, accounted for 90 percent of the growth of the entire beverage industry between 2002 and 2005. By the end of the decade, they are expected to outsell soda.

Despite the chicness of certain brands, the market is dominated by hundreds of more workaday waters. Brands like Crystal Geyser, Kirkland and Arrowhead function as tap water for a country that spends most of its time away from the tap. While even the most pedestrian waters invoke the grandeur of their source — a secluded spring, a glacial brook — Gary Hemphill of the Beverage Marketing Corporation says, “As far as consumers go, I don’t sense that they really care one way or the other.” We just want water. “If you could put your kitchen sink on your back and carry it around with you, the bottled-water industry might not be as big as it is today.”

Michelle Barry of the market research firm the Hartman Group told me, “Water is not really critically considered” — not even the object itself, it seems. “We believe bottled water has become less about the physical act of hydration and more about being a companion to people,” she said. “They like to walk around with it and hold it.” Increasingly, the typical consumer sips out of a bottle of water “to mark time.” “It’s like their bangle,” Barry added, meaning a security blanket. Or rather, each bottle of water is one in a readily available cast of interchangeable security blankets that we can capriciously acquire and toss throughout the day.

Several industry people told me that water’s most exciting growth is now in sales of large multipacks or flats of single-serving bottles — stockpiles that we keep in our pantries or garages and grab a few bottles from on our way out the door. The obvious question then is, why not fill up a reusable bottle from the tap and take that with us. “If you’re on the go, and you’re buying something to consume on the go,” Barry told me, “that assumes you don’t have the time for preparation before you go. You need that ultimate convenience.” It follows that you don’t have time to shepherd around that bottle once it is empty either.

Americans will throw out more than two million tons of PET bottles this year. Even when recycled, it is hard to turn scrap PET into new bottles. More virgin material is always necessary. PET is a petroleum product; it comes from oil. The Container Recycling Institute estimates that 18 million barrels of crude-oil equivalent were needed to replace the bottles we chucked in 2005, bottles that were likely shipped long distances to begin with — from Maine or Calistoga or Fiji.

Whether more states manage to put deposits on bottled water or not, we have become real-life grotesques of the disconnected, profligate consumer the bottle bill saw coming and, waving a roll of nickels, tried to fend off. I easily bought more than a dozen bottles of water while working on this article.

## Redemption

Three weeks ago, the Northwest Grocery Association proposed its own startling modernization of the Oregon bottle bill. The State Legislature, Joe Gilliam told me, “hasn’t understood or really wanted to understand” how devastating its just-add-water expansion would be to grocers. Grudgingly resigned to some kind of expansion, Gilliam came to the table at the 11th hour with a more grocer-friendly, radical reinvention of the system: all carbonated and noncarbonated beverages and liquor would carry nickel deposits, and new, state-run redemption centers — not grocers — would handle the returns. They’d also collect materials like home electronics. Grocers would help finance the redemption centers and relinquish all unredeemed deposits to a state anti-litter program.

A legislative committee promptly ignored this proposal, however, passing the original expansion to the full chamber, where, as of last week, it awaited probable passage. Meanwhile, after rocketing through one house of the State Legislature, Connecticut’s expansion was recently killed in committee. (Proponents have promised to resurrect the measure as part of another bill.) New York’s “Bigger Better Bottle Bill” continued to gain unprecedented momentum, though it still faced some discouraging resistance in one house.

“It probably won’t go through this year,” the Rev. Dr. Earl Kooperkamp told me last month. Kooperkamp helped introduce the Bigger Better Bottle Bill campaign six years ago. He is 50 now, with an odd little braid of hair that swishes at the back of his clerical collar. He had invited me to Saint Mary’s Episcopal Church in Harlem, to a monthly meeting he holds for “canners,” those who scour the city for bottles and cans for a living. The meeting is part support group (he helps those harassed by grocers file complaints) and part long-range planning committee (he envisions canners lobbying for improvements to the law). He is confident that, if the deposit were raised to a dime, more than enough containers would still be abandoned to keep his canners in business. Kooperkamp calls the group the Redeemers.

It's unclear how big a share of America's recycling the homeless and working poor do. Clearly it is considerable. The Container Recycling Institute reports that an average of 490 beverage containers are recycled per person per year in bottle-bill states. Yet many canners told me that they can easily earn a daily wage of 20 or 30 dollars; each then recycles upward of 600 containers every day. When proponents argue that bottle bills are the best way to capture containers consumed on the go, it's not because a frenzied Dr. Pepper drinker will make a scrupulous detour to return the can, but because, when that can is inevitably thrown out, a scavenger might retrieve it.

In Manhattan, many canners start at the tip of the island after the first Statue of Liberty ferries have sailed. They hit Wall Street as lunch is ending and wind up in Times Square to pick up after the pretheater stampede. Since canners may not get to a grocery store before closing, Kooperkamp describes the rise of "mobile redemption," middlemen in trucks who buy loads late at night, two for a nickel. Fearing overnight theft, many canners in Portland sleep beside their containers at bottle houses. Though few in Portland find it worth their time to dig through garbage; most work set routes, emptying each neighborhood's curbside bins on its designated recycling night — a situation that may signal a breakdown of both systems.

While we sat in the church foyer waiting for Redeemers, Kooperkamp explained that, in Leviticus, the Bible issues laws about leaving the corners of your fields for the poor to harvest. "It's saying that something has to be left that somebody else can make use of," he said. "What the Redeemers are doing is gleaning the fields, sustaining their lives in a way that actually ends up making life better for all of us." Still, Leviticus had to remind us to leave some for the gleaners. Today enough useful detritus seems to flake off our lives by itself that an entire underground economy traffics in our trash.

The bottle bill created an economic incentive for something its authors felt we ought to do for its own sake. It was a mandate to recycle rather than litter but, more broadly, to stay mindful of the tension between convenience and conscientiousness — to stay tethered to our waste as, more and more, that connection slackened. Talking with Kooperkamp, I realized that canners may be the only ones even remotely living the principle of the bottle bill as Richard Chambers envisioned it, and only then, out of desperation.

"A good number of the Redeemers see that they're doing a real service," Kooperkamp said, "cleaning up after us, taking care of the environment." Some come to see picking up a can — replacing it into the cyclic narrative from which it strayed — "as running totally opposite to our egocentric, convenience-driven, disposable culture." It can be a deeply connective act. "I went to seminary," Kooperkamp told me. "I learned all about redemption. Redemption is about taking something that is worthless and giving it value, about taking that worthless thing and changing it into something life-sustaining." Jean Rice, a canner in the Bronx, summed it up this way: "Five years ago, I used to call myself a canner. But now I call myself an ecological engineer."

After an hour, it was clear that no Redeemers would show. Kooperkamp apologized, reached for his cup of coffee (paper, with a plastic sip-top) and stood up. His whole demeanor said, Ah well, maybe next time. These guys have pressing difficulties in their lives, he said. He understood why they might not be focused on the long-term.

*Jon Mooallem, a contributing writer, last wrote for the magazine about Kink.com, an online pornography company.*