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MEMORANDUM

Beverage Container Redemption and the COVID-19 Emergency

Monday, April 6, 2020

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The CT Dept. of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) has extended its suspension of enforcement activities for the state's refundable container deposit law (AKA "*the bottle bill*") until April 30th, at the earliest. As of today, 8 of the 10 bottle bill states have temporarily suspended enforcement activities, largely driven by consumer traffic and staff shortages brought on by COVID-19 that make it difficult for retailers to stock shelves and maintain cleanliness while providing redemption services. .

CCE recognizes the severity of this unprecedented health crisis, and are acutely sensitive to the needs of grocers dealing with staff shortages and increased consumer demands as a result of COVID-19. CCE applauds the grocery store industry for their service to the community during these challenging times.

Unfortunately, some retailers have misinterpreted DEEP's guidance to mean that there is significant risk of COVID-19 transmission through container redemption and that the law itself is suspended. This has caused most retailers to completely shut down their bottle return operations, leaving sizeable portions of the state's population without convenient options for container recycling and repayment. DEEP has now clarified that "The Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) believes that the risk of transmission from handling bottles is low and that the greatest risk of transmission is from person-to-person interaction."

For these reasons, the disruption of Connecticut's bottle bill program should last only as long as genuinely needed until grocery store staff levels stabilize, and not a moment longer.

While enforcement of Connecticut's bottle bill program has been suspended on a temporary basis, this policy will inevitably have an adverse impact on container recycling in our state. Return-to-retail options make up a critical part of our container recycling infrastructure, as they provide consumers with ample convenient options for bottle deposit recycling and repayment.

Retailers need clear and consistent direction from the state about how to implement this temporary interruption. Many businesses have unnecessarily refused to accept returnables, including package stores that may not be facing the same consumer demands as grocers. Some have provided misleading messaging that is contrary to DEEP's own guidance; inaccurately informing consumers that the state has taken such actions as a way to prevent the spread of COVID-19. **DEEP and/or the CT Dept. of Consumer Protection should provide retailers with uniform signage clarifying that the suspension of bottle redemption programs is a response to increased consumer traffic and staff shortages, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.**

Now more than ever, residents and businesses must rely on science-based information about how to protect public health. DEEP has issued recommendations for employees to help minimize potential infection risks, and retail establishments should employ them whenever possible. These include wearing gloves when handling potentially contaminated items, thoroughly sanitizing workplace equipment and practicing proper hygiene, including good hand-washing techniques. These recommendations are consistent with OSHA recommendations for combating the spread of infectious disease, and retail stores should be held to the same standard during these uncertain times.

Finally, DEEP should emphasize that bottle & can redemption centers that do not face these challenges remain in operation today. Redemption centers now make up the vast majority of the state's bottle return infrastructure, and one of the only options available for consumers to redeem their deposits. Furthermore, this helps keep these small businesses open during these dire economic times, while remaining an important source of revenue for many low-income families.