



SURE WE CAN
WHERE EVERYONE COUNTS

Environmental Conservation Budget Hearing Testimony, 2/7

Good afternoon. My name is Ryan Castalia. I'm Executive Director of Sure We Can, a Brooklyn-based redemption center and nonprofit serving independent recyclers. Thank you to the Chairs for the opportunity to testify today. We're here today to discuss environmental conservation and the urgent action that needs to be taken to ensure our communities aren't buried underneath the overwhelming burdens of pollution and climate change. The consequences of inaction are evident—millions of New Yorkers are in real danger of losing their lives or livelihoods. One might think that this incredible urgency would translate into swift action, yet sensible waste policy has been trapped in political paralysis, even as the most effective recycling system that exists in our state—the Bottle Bill—crumbles around us.

The Bottle Bill works, period. It's demonstrated its efficacy continuously for decades, resulting in the diversion of millions of tons of waste and vast reductions in litter in our communities without cost to the state—in fact, it generates revenue. It's even become a mechanism for environmental justice, creating a low-barrier way for marginalized people from all kinds of backgrounds to become independent recyclers who work, contribute to their communities, and earn a livelihood. In a very basic way, this system makes our communities cleaner and stronger.

This effectiveness has created an excuse for benign neglect, an out-of-sight-out-of-mind approach that's incompatible with the stakes of the waste crisis. With today's cost of living, a 5c deposit, established in 1983, isn't a realistic reflection of the value of the material or the labor of those who return it. A study done by Sure We Can in 2023 indicated independent recyclers in New York City earn an average "wage" of \$5/hour—less than a third of minimum wage for essential workers on the frontlines of waste diversion and recycling. The handling fee that supports redemption centers is also out of date. Redemption centers are closing every day because it's too expensive to operate—small businesses providing essential services are collapsing, and making the system at large harder to access for everyone. Vague and unenforced regulation has made accountability between redemption centers and distributors almost impossible. Over 100 redemption centers have closed across the state in the past year, limiting availability of service for everyone. And finally, many types of containers are arbitrarily excluded from the system, creating needless confusion and inconsistency, not to mention increasing litter. All this combines to hamper the system's efficacy, put more trash on the streets, depress small businesses, and keep independent recycling entrepreneurs trapped on the margins.

With three simple updates, an already-working system could reach new heights. A 10c deposit would push our return rates, now at around 70%, up to 90%, as other states have seen. It would mean more income for independent recyclers and more revenue for the state for unredeemed deposits. An increased handling fee would allow redemption centers to flourish

instead of suffer, creating new access points and driving local economic activity. More containers included would mean a drastic increase in the volume of material diverted from our landfills and waterways.

Of course, nothing to do with large-scale policy is simple. However, with determination, we can resolve the technical issues and stakeholder concerns that have held up this absolutely necessary update. We welcome transparency and accountability into the system, and want to work together with distributors to dispel the counterproductive and ever-present narrative of fraud through the creation of a fully transparent, DEC-managed shared platform where transactions would be reported and concerns could be flagged. We want to create exceptions for small liquor stores, wineries, or other businesses that don't have the capacity to handle material, and direct that material to local redemption centers, the creation of which could be supported by finally allocating funds to the Beverage Container Assistance Program, through which not a cent has so far been distributed since its creation in 2009. The DEC also needs to be funded to provide consistent, sensitive, and knowledgeable oversight of the system.

As a revenue generator for the state, and given the need for allocation of funds to support the DEC and redemption infrastructure, the Bigger Better Bottle Bill belongs in the budget. The proposal is a win-win-win-win for New York: it creates revenue, creates jobs, increases recycling, and promotes environmental justice. And truly, we don't have any time to lose. Even as we speak, redemption centers are being pushed further toward the brink, and before this law is passed, I guarantee, more will close. Small businesses and marginalized entrepreneurs will suffer and disappear. If this paralysis continues, all New Yorkers' lives will be severely affected: their communities will be more littered, their waterways more polluted, and their income hampered. We're lucky to have here a system that already exists, and already works, and that with a few small updates can be made even better, for the state, for communities, for the planet. We can't afford to neglect it any longer. I urge you to act quickly and pass the Bigger, Better Bottle Bill.