

House Lawmakers Reject Expansion of Bottle Bill

Written by Lynn Campbell
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Iowa lawmakers have once again crushed a proposal to expand the state's 1978 bottle bill.

A panel of lawmakers on February 22 heard testimony on [House Study Bill 652](#), which would expand Iowa's beverage-container-control law – the anti-litter law more commonly known as the “bottle bill,” – to include water bottles and sports drinks.

But the bill's floor manager made clear that the legislation isn't going anywhere this year.

“I'm not a big fan of expanding the bottle bill,” said state Representative Jason Schultz (R-Schleswig). “I'm not sold on the positives. Back home, the district tells me they're interested in keeping what we have. I don't have a lot of interest from constituents in expanding and storing and hauling more bottles, more containers. And we have a curbside recycling program in most of the communities. Status quo seems okay in western Iowa.”

Iowa [is one of 10 states that has a bottle bill](#), along with California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Oregon, and Vermont.

State law requires Iowans to pay a five-cent deposit on cans and bottles for all carbonated and alcoholic beverages – including beer, soft drinks, wine, and liquor. That money is refunded

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when empty containers are returned to a grocery store or redemption center.

Bill Wimmer, a lobbyist for Hy-Vee Food Stores and the Iowa Beverage Association (a trade association that represents the state's non-alcoholic-beverage industry), said part of the problem with Iowa's bottle bill is that no neighboring states have a similar law.

"We are an island of a bottle bill surrounded by states that don't have it," Wimmer said. "We have a lot of cross-border fraud that goes on. Our distributors on the 'coasts' redeem significantly more than they sell. And that's a major, major problem for them."

But advocates of expanding the law argue that the types of beverage containers have changed and grown since Iowa's bottle bill was enacted more than three decades ago. They say the law should be updated to include those water bottles and sports drinks.

"As a consumer, I think it would keep the environment cleaner," said Donald Fick, a veterinarian from Muscatine. "If I were a grocery-store manager and had to deal with that, I may look at it differently. But you do not see many 'deposable' cans along the roadsides, on the streets, and there's a reason for that. You do see clear plastic sports drinks, water bottles."

Adam Gregg, a lobbyist for Indiana glass company Verallia, which buys recycled glass from Iowa, said Verallia officials like Iowa's bottle bill because it keeps glass pure by separating it from the rest of the waste stream.

Gregg advocated for expanding Iowa's bottle bill so it would cover 500 types of containers not covered under current law. Citing a study by Iowa State University economist Dermot Hayes, Gregg said expanding the bottle bill would create or preserve more than 1,100 jobs, including redemption-center workers.

"You're considering a jobs bill today," Gregg told lawmakers. "The bill before you today would create over 300 jobs almost immediately while preserving the over 800 jobs that are supported by the current bottle-bill system."

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House Study Bill 652 also would double the “handling fee” paid to retailers by distributors, such as the Coca-Cola Atlantic Bottling Co. in Waukeg, from 1 cent to 2 cents for plastic containers. The fee helps retailers to cover the cost of handling the containers.

But Scott Sundstrom, a lobbyist for the Iowa Grocery Industry Association – which represents chain and independent supermarkets, convenience stores, mass merchandisers, wholesalers, brokers, manufacturers, and distributors – argued against the bill, even if it would mean more money for retailers.

“This is a jobs bill for an out-of-state glass company that’s happy to use our inefficient system that puts burdens on our retail and beverage community, so they get a cheap raw material. And I don’t think that’s good for Iowa,” Sundstrom said.

An estimated 1.65 billion beverage containers are redeemed annually in Iowa, according to the Iowa Recycling Association.

Iowa’s bottle bill has over the years enjoyed bipartisan support, although grocers have lobbied to get the sticky cans out of their stores for sanitary reasons.

“Grocery stores, they claim that it’s a hassle, it’s dirty,” said Sheri Cunningham, who’s owned the Pella Redemption Center for 11 years. “They don’t want it, because it’s an inconvenience. To save our land, to save our future, why not deal with a little inconvenience?”

This year’s proposed legislation goes in the opposite direction of [bottle-bill legislation last year](#) , which would have repealed Iowa’s beverage-container-control law.

House Study Bill 652 will not clear this week’s self-imposed legislative “funnel” deadline, which requires bills to clear one committee to be considered alive for the remainder of the session.

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But advocates say the proposal remains alive with a new bill in the Iowa Senate that contains an appropriation. Budget and tax bills are exempt from the legislative funnel.

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