

Maine can protect its lakes, farms and bottle bill all at the same time | Opinion

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Russell Voss *lives in Gray.*

Maine people believe in recycling. Always have. Long before companies started putting green leaves on labels and calling it environmental leadership, folks here were bringing bags of cans down to the redemption center for a nickel apiece.

The bottle bill works because regular people take part in it.

Which is why the current debate in Augusta about LD 2141 is worth paying attention to. The bill would direct a portion of unclaimed, or unredeemed, bottle deposits to two things Maine desperately needs: protecting lake water quality and helping preserve working farmland.

The proposal would invest in the Lake Water Quality Restoration and Protection Fund and the Maine Working Farmland Access and Protection Program. Even after those investments, at least two-thirds of the unclaimed deposits would still stay in the redemption system.

In other words, the bottle bill stays strong.

But if you listen to beverage distributors, you'd think the whole system might collapse if a portion of that money goes somewhere else.

That raises a simple question: Whose money is it?

When you buy a drink in Maine, you pay a 5-cent deposit. If that bottle never makes its way back to the redemption center, that deposit doesn't magically become the private property of beverage companies. It's money paid by Maine people that simply went unclaimed.

Right now, we're talking about roughly \$11 million-\$16 million a year. That's real money. And the question before lawmakers is whether a portion of it could help protect the lakes and farmland that define this state.

Because Maine's lakes are starting to show signs of stress. Warmer temperatures and runoff are fueling algae blooms in places that used to be crystal clear. That's not just an environmental problem — it's an economic one.

Our lakes support fishing guides, campgrounds, summer camps, small businesses and local property values. Altogether, they generate an estimated \$14 billion in economic value for the state. Yet there's no consistent annual funding dedicated to protecting them.

Meanwhile, working farmland continues to disappear as land prices rise and development pressure grows. LD 2141 would put some of those unclaimed deposits to work addressing both problems.

And Maine wouldn't be the first place to do it.

In Michigan, 75% of unclaimed bottle deposits go into a fund used for environmental cleanup and redevelopment. In Vermont, about \$11 million from unclaimed deposits has been directed

to the state's Clean Water Fund since 2020. Both states maintain strong bottle redemption programs.

So the idea that this would somehow "break" Maine's bottle bill doesn't hold much water.

There's also another part of the conversation that tends to get skipped. Distributors often talk about the cost of collecting and processing containers. Fair enough. Running a statewide recycling system isn't free. But once those containers are collected, they don't just vanish.

Aluminum cans, glass bottles and plastic containers are baled up and sold on recycling markets. Aluminum, in particular, is one of the most valuable recyclable materials in the world. It can be melted down and reused over and over again. If Maine is recycling roughly 847 million containers a year, those materials have real market value.

That revenue helps offset the cost of the system. Yet the public rarely sees a full accounting of how that side of the equation works. And when the public is being asked to protect a financial structure, transparency shouldn't be a problem.

Still, the bigger picture here is pretty simple.

LD 2141 doesn't eliminate the bottle bill. It doesn't stop people from returning cans. It doesn't dismantle the recycling system Maine built decades ago. What it does is take a portion of unclaimed deposits — money paid by Maine consumers — and invest it in protecting two things that make this state what it is: clean lakes and working farms. Most Mainers would probably agree that's a pretty reasonable use of the money.

Sometimes the best solutions aren't complicated. Sometimes they're just common sense.

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