

Coronavirus put can and bottle redemptions on hold. Garages and basements are filling up

Environmental advocates fear the empties are being thrown out

By [Andy Rosen](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 28, 2020, 4:08 p.m.



Chris Furtado can't bear to toss out bottles and cans. With many redemption sites closed because of the pandemic, the Swanset resident has accumulated a lot of empties. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The bottles and cans have been accumulating in Chris Furtado's shed since March. He doesn't even drink soda, but his fiancée does, and her Dr Pepper and Mountain Dew containers are now piled on top of his snow blower. He hopes they'll be gone before winter.

Furtado, of Swanset, is waiting — as many others in Massachusetts are — for the state to resume its normal redemption regime, which has been on hold for more than two months, since the state made collections optional for retailers and distributors as a way to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. He knows his haul will net him only around \$20, but it's his money, and he wants it back.

"It's five cents a can," said Furtado, who works as a transit equipment maintenance manager. "For me, you're paying it, so to throw that away is going to be foolish."

Five cents isn't much by itself, but the unreturned bottles and cans in the state are adding up as the empties accumulate in basements and garages, wind up in the regular recycling, or just get thrown out.

An intense debate has begun about what should happen next, adding to a long history of difficult negotiations between the state, the waste management and beverage industries, and environmental groups over the direction of the redemption system.

The Department of Environmental Protection said in a statement that it “is finalizing a plan to resume enforcement of the bottle and can redemption regulations and ensure customers can redeem bottles and cans at locations throughout the Commonwealth.”

The plan “will include guidelines to protect the safety of all retail employees and the public,” the statement said. But state officials have not yet released the details – or the timing – of what they intend to do.

The full effect of the pandemic on redemption in Massachusetts is not yet clear, because the state has not released data on all of the deposits that went uncollected during April and May.

Some advocates are calling for a quick resumption, concerned about the possibility that many that normally would have been returned will be discarded rather than recycled.

On Thursday, environmental organizations including the Conservation Law Foundation and the advocacy organization MassPIRG sent a letter to state officials noting that neighboring New York and Connecticut are moving toward fully restoring their programs.

“The scientific community has made it clear that the risk of transmitting the virus by touching a bag or bottle is almost nonexistent,” the foundation said in a statement. The groups also want the state to end its temporary ban on reusable grocery bags.

Many in the beverage industry, meanwhile, argue the state should proceed deliberately until more is known about whether used containers can transmit the novel coronavirus.

“We’re doing all of these efforts across the state aimed at reducing contact, and then we’re going to increase potential contact by enforcing the redemption system? It’s not rational,” said Robert A. Mellion, executive director of the Massachusetts Package Stores Association.

The telltale clink and crinkle of the redemption process has not gone completely silent in Massachusetts. Retailers, who get a cut of what they collect, can still choose to accept containers, and some standalone redemption centers remain up and running — doing their best to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 as they handle all those dirty empties.

At the Roslindale Redemption Center this week, mask-wearing employees stood outside, keeping several feet away from the stream of customers arriving via car, bike, and foot to unload their Memorial Day weekend refuse.

The calculations for how to safely manage redemptions are complicated. Buddy Ryan, who owns Broad Street Bottle & Can in Quincy, shut down in late March. But before that, he was working hard to find ways to collect bottles and cans through minimal contact with the people dropping them off. He said he was basically using the honor system, asking customers to tally up their own redeemables. He then left the haul untouched for a few days to reduce the risk the virus had survived inside a bag or on a container.

“Count them outdoors; let me know how many you got,” Ryan would tell people. “Put them in a bag. I’ll pay you whatever you say.”

Beverage distributors are still supposed to be retrieving containers from redemption sites, according to the state, but several redemption centers contacted by the Globe said they've had trouble getting rid of some of the bottles and cans they have acquired – further limiting their ability to collect.

William Kelley, president of the Beer Distributors of Massachusetts trade group, said collecting cans and bottles from stores adds another layer of contact in a business that already involves a lot of in-person interaction during a dangerous time.

“Their concerns are the concerns that everyone in the Commonwealth shares, and that is exposure of their employees to unnecessary risk,” Kelley said of distributors. He added that he is not insulated from the frustrations of people unable to redeem their deposits. Kelley has his own growing stash of bottles and cans ready to go back to the store when it's safe.

Janet Domenitz executive director of MassPIRG, said she hopes that will be soon. Even reopening the lower-touch automated collection devices in many stores would be a good start, she said, though she believes over-the-counter transactions are possible with the proper precautions.

Domenitz said people tend to recycle more in states that have bottle deposits, and she's concerned that a long disruption could damage the complex infrastructure that underlies the system in Massachusetts. She said environmentally friendly practices could play a role in heading off future pandemics that could be worsened by a warming planet.

“If we don't do a better job of caring for our planet and reducing the emissions that we create, we're going to see more of this,” said Domenitz, who noted that waste disposal is a major producer of greenhouse gases. “That might sound a little bit grandiose and global, but I think that's connected more than ever in the wake of this pandemic.”

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