WASTE & RECYCLING

Time to clean up: Why Ontario needs a deposit Return system for all beverage containers

by **Samantha Millette & Clarissa Morawski**
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Ontario's beverage container deposit return system (DRS) is stuck in the past. Nearly two decades after it was introduced, the program still applies only to alcohol containers, leaving most beverage packaging, like water bottles, pop cans, juice boxes, and energy drinks, outside the system. Ontario and Manitoba are now the only two provinces in Canada with such a limited approach.

The result? Hundreds of tonnes of plastic, aluminum, and glass littering our streets, parks, and natural areas, and taxpayers footing the bill. A recent study by Eunomia Research & Consulting estimates that beverage container litter costs Ontario municipalities roughly $3 million each year, accounting for 8% of the $36 million total spent on managing ground litter across the province.

Beverage containers make up about 8% of ground litter by weight, and 20% of Blue Box materials. That translates to approximately 1,500 tonnes of beverage container litter annually, most of it from containers that would be captured by a deposit system in nearly every other province.

The limits of curbside recycling

Some point to Ontario's recent shift to a full extended producer responsibility (EPR) system for packaging as a sign that we're solving the problem. Under the new framework, producers are now responsible for funding and operating Ontario's Blue Box residential curbside recycling program. While this is an important step forward, EPR alone is not enough to address the full scope of beverage container waste.

Ontario's curbside program works well to collect most packaging types, but its impact on litter and away-from-home waste is limited. Beverage containers are uniquely prone to being consumed outside, on the go, at parks, events, and in vehicles, which

makes them particularly likely to be discarded improperly. No matter how efficient the curbside system becomes, it will never capture what doesn't make it into the bin in the first place.

This is where DRS shines.

A proven litter reduction tool

Reloop's latest report, *Littered with Evidence: Proof that Deposit Return Systems Work*, provides the most comprehensive review to date of the impact of DRS on litter reduction. Drawing on data from more than 20 jurisdictions across Europe, North America, and Australia, the report consolidates decades of research, both before-and-after analyses and comparative studies, to answer a critical question: How effective is DRS at reducing beverage container litter?

The before-and-after evidence is striking. In New York, the 2009 expansion of the state's deposit system to include plastic water bottles led to a 41% drop in the proportion of plastic bottles found in litter (by count) between 2008 and 2015. In the Republic of Ireland, where a deposit system was introduced in early 2024, early results show a 30% reduction in drink can litter and a 20% drop in plastic bottle litter just months after launch. Marine litter surveys conducted by Coastwatch Ireland recorded the lowest bottle and can counts in 25 years, with bottle litter per kilometre falling from a peak of 100 in 2010 to below eight in 2024.

In the Netherlands, expansion of the DRS has delivered similarly powerful results. After small plastic bottles were added in mid-2021, roadside litter counts fell by 71%, from 9.4 bottles per kilometre before expansion to just 2.7 in 2024. The addition of cans in 2023 led to an 80% drop in can litter within a year. Overall, litter from deposit-bearing containers dropped by 79% between 2020 and 2024, while non-deposit container litter rose by 20%, underscoring the direct impact of DRS.

Latvia, which launched its DRS in early 2022, saw beverage container litter along coastal sites fall by 43% within the first nine months, and by 56% within two years. When broken down by material, plastic bottle litter fell by 69%, aluminum cans by 52%, and glass bottles by 48%. These sharp declines reflect patterns seen in other jurisdictions soon after launching a DRS, underscoring how quickly and reliably these systems reduce litter.

Comparative studies reinforce these findings. Using data from the Ocean Conservancy's 2023 *International Coastal Cleanup*, Reloop examined litter collected across 42 U.S. states where data was available: 10 with DRS and 32 without. The results are striking: in DRS states, plastic bottles and beverage cans together made up just 5.2% of all litter (by count), compared to 10.2% in non-DRS states, nearly double the share (see Figure 1).

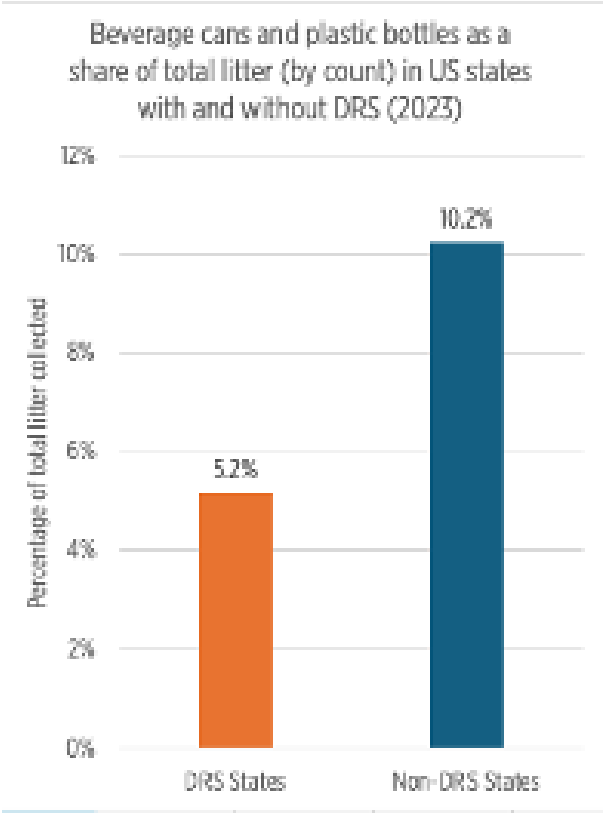

Figure 1

When considered separately, plastic beverage bottles made up an average of 3.0% of litter in DRS states versus 5.3% in non-DRS states (43% lower), while beverage cans accounted for 2.2% versus 4.9% (55% lower). The analysis also found that states with higher deposits performed best (see Figure 2). Oregon and Michigan, the only states with a USD$0.10 deposit at the time, had the lowest rates of beverage container litter, at just 2.8% and 2.3% of total litter, respectively. These findings underscore the effectiveness of deposit systems, particularly those with meaningful deposit rates in reducing beverage container waste.

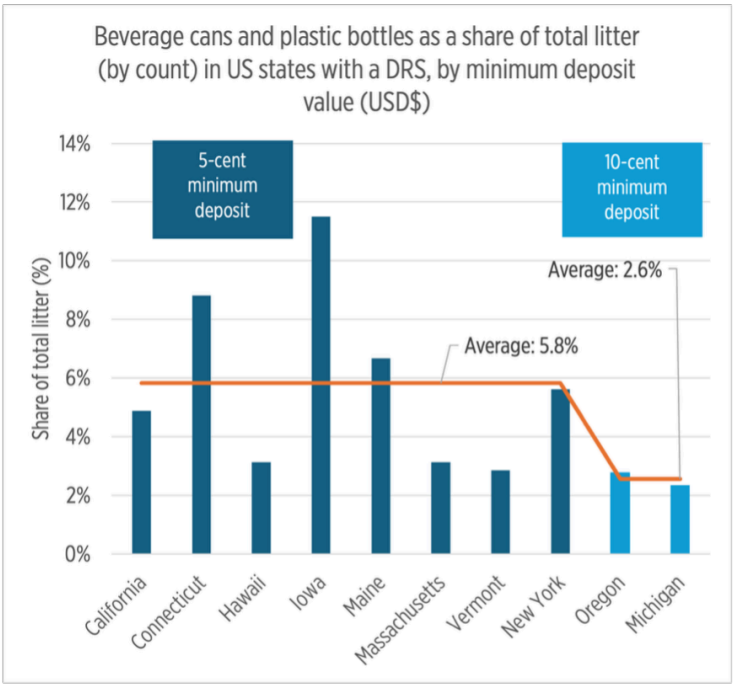

Figure 2

Together, this growing body of evidence leaves little doubt: jurisdictions that implement or expand DRS typically see beverage container litter decline by 40% to 70%, with even greater reductions in some cases.

The missed opportunity in Ontario

Ontario's limited DRS means the province is missing out on the environmental and financial benefits already being realized elsewhere. In Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, for instance, deposit systems cover all beverage types and return rates regularly exceed 80%, keeping millions of containers out of landfills and public spaces. In these provinces, the financial burden of beverage container litter is greatly reduced, and the containers themselves are recovered in cleaner, more recyclable form.

By contrast, Ontario's recovery rate for non-alcohol containers, collected through the Blue Box, is significantly lower. Even under full producer responsibility, it's unlikely to exceed 60%, and that's assuming containers are not lost to contamination, incineration, or disposal. These losses mean higher costs for municipalities and poorer environmental outcomes.

Meanwhile, beverage producers in Ontario continue to benefit from a fragmented system that externalizes the true cost of container waste. And taxpayers are left to cover the cleanup. Although the government briefly explored the possibility of expanding its DRS in 2024, establishing a working group that met for over a year to study how such a system could operate, the effort was quietly shelved following pressure from retailers, despite strong public support and mounting evidence of the system's benefits.

Public support and proven infrastructure

The infrastructure for an expanded system already exists. The Beer Store operates a province-wide collection network for alcohol containers that could be adapted to accept non-alcohol beverages. In addition, starting January 1, 2026, Ontario grocery stores over 4,000 square feet that sell alcohol will be required to accept empty alcohol containers, creating a broader retail return network that could also serve non-alcohol containers with minimal additional effort. What's missing is the political will to modernize and expand it.

Public support for expanding the system strong. A 2024 poll commissioned by Environmental Defence found that 81% of Ontarians support a deposit-return system for non-alcoholic beverage containers. They see the litter on the ground, the overflowing bins in parks, and the growing plastic pollution in lakes and rivers. And they recognize that small changes, like a 10-cent deposit, can lead to big impacts.

A smarter way forward

Deposit return systems and EPR are not mutually exclusive. They are complementary policies that, when combined, create a stronger, more comprehensive approach to waste reduction and recycling. EPR improves performance in the home; DRS fills the gap in public spaces and directly addresses the litter problem. Together, they help build a circular economy that keeps materials in use and out of the environment.

Ontario's failure to expand its DRS is not a question of technical feasibility, but rather one of priorities. Will we continue to let 1,500 tonnes/year of beverage container waste pollute our environment and cost municipalities millions? Or will we follow the evidence, join the majority of Canadian provinces, and bring our system into the 21st century?

The choice is clear. It's time for Ontario to clean up its act and expand deposit return to all beverage containers.

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