



Last fall's effort to bring the "bottle bill" before the state legislature for action failed because not enough signatures were obtained statewide to accomplish the feat.

If you'd been among the volunteers gathering signatures, you'd have been heartened to hear the hundreds of comments made by people who came willingly — some even made a special trip — to sign the petition.

And you'd have been dismayed to hear the scoffers who declared "It's not working other places. It'll put people out of work. It's a failure. There's no sense in it."

The lady who said "We spent the summer touring the North West, and Oregon's highways are amazingly litter-free!" represented one extreme; the man wearing a truck driver's uniform, the other. He argued the practical problems of transporting empties back to the bottling plants and the economics of handling, cleaning and refilling used bottles.

There were those, too, who either didn't care or couldn't be bothered signing their names, and those who had never heard of recycling (believe it or not) and wanted to learn.

It's not easy to obtain several hundred thousand signatures of registered voters throughout the state, and it's difficult for a loosely organized group of volunteers to buck powerful container and beverage industries pushing multimillion-dollar lobbying campaigns to kill bottle bills across the nation.

In Oregon, the industries have abandoned the fight; not because it's a failure, but because Oregon's two million residents have, nine to one, demonstrated they'll make it work.

Oregon law encourages returnable bottles by valuing at a minimum of a nickel, nearly all empty beverage containers and banning pull-tab cans. As a result, throwaway bottles have been nearly eliminated in the state and use of beverage cans greatly reduced.

Among canners and bottlers, however, the law is regarded as a nuisance, and while they've given up in Oregon, the battle is on to prevent the law's spreading to other states.

The Commerce Department (and one wonders whose side they are on and why) recently published a staff study concluding a federal bottle bill would reduce total highway litter only 10% to 12%, assuming a 90% rate of return.

It also concludes 80,000 jobs in bottle and can manufacturing would be lost. It does estimate that 100,000 other workers, at lower pay, would be added in retailing and distribution. Costs to switch to an all-refillable system, it reports, would require capital expenditures of between \$2 and \$3 billion. That's quite a spread.

Oregonians, however, take pride in improvements they can see. Beverage container litter is greatly reduced and overall litter is somewhat reduced since the law went into effect in 1972.

An independent study backs up the claims of Oregon residents. An industrial engineer and environmentalist conducted a "before and after" study based on the state's beverage container litter and reports a 72% drop the first year and an 82% decrease the second, as compared with the year before the law went into effect.

Furthermore, roadside litter in general decreased 35% the first year and 47% the second. Apparently litter begets litter.

These figures, of course, are disputed by most representatives of the Can Manufacturers Institute, although even that source admits "Oregon highways appear somewhat cleaner."

Some beverage-industry officials, on the other hand, are supporters of the law. One, who believes it's working and working well, says "It's my personal opinion the law has had a tremendous impact. There's certainly not as much litter now and this is very visible." He is chairman of Blitz-Weinhard Co., a Portland brewery.

The people of Oregon want to make the bill work; estimates indicate more than 90% of empty soft drink bottles and almost as many beer empties are returned.

In other states, as well, there are supporters. A Golden, Colorado, Adolph Coors Co. spokesman states "Some type of deposit legislation seems unavoidable." The Coors Co. has been recycling beverage cans and favors an across-the-board, uniform deposit law.

Aside from litter reduction, is there any other good reason for recycling containers? One study claims Oregon energy savings could heat the homes of 50,000 people, or generate 130 million kilowatt hours of electricity worth \$2.8 million annually.

The Commerce Department's report estimates a nationwide energy savings equivalent to 24 million barrels of oil a year by 1980 but terms this a "minor saving" compared with estimated total annual U.S. requirements of 15.7 billion barrels of oil a year.

With householders and individuals being encouraged to save every drop of fuel and every kilowatt of power, why does a government agency denigrate a possible savings of 24 million barrels of oil a year? This thinking is at the root of our problems, in this country. Why bother to save, where possible, when the needs to spend are so incredible?

The answer to that question is simply: "Little drops of water, little grains of sand, make the mighty ocean and the pleasant land," as Robert Louis Stevenson's children's couplet points out.

In employment, the law in Oregon produced its expected shift, decreasing container-manufacturing jobs and increasing those in distribution and retailing.

Oregon product prices vary, with some sources reporting higher costs and other lower or equal to those in neighboring Washington State. Industry profits also appear to vary. In one study, five industries (excluding retailers) showed a combined reduction in pre-tax profits, with can manufacturers and private-label soft drink producers hurting most. Critics protest the study was biased to favor beverage and container industries which supplied most of the data.

An independent study conducted by two Oregon State University professors includes retailers among six industries considered and shows combined operating profits increased by \$3.9 million in the first year the law was in effect.

Despite reluctance of bottlers and brewers to discuss profit impact, a Pepsi-Cola franchise holder in Portland concedes his company is more profitable now, because it no longer purchases canned soft drinks and thus realizes "full manufacturing profits from its bottling line."

Blitz Weinhard Co. indicates the brewery saves by not having to purchase as many new containers. One retailer, a strong proponent of the bottle bill, concedes the law creates problems for him, "We do have more empty bottles to store, but I'd rather see them in the back rooms of my stores than on the highways."

Most consumers agree, though some are still unaware as evidenced by the fresh supply of roadside litter each day.

All the studies and arguments, estimates and reports, pros and cons, would be unnecessary if more people would take responsibility for their own behavior, decline to buy products not available in returnable containers, and recycle returnable empties.

Popular demand would bring a rapid change in containerization and eliminate any need for studies, reports, or legislation.

Once again, it's up to the individual.