

Let's bring back refillable!

By Chris Benz

Mexico, the Philippines, and Germany are millions of bottles ahead of the US when it comes to reducing plastic waste from single-use beverage bottles. These countries, which charge a deposit that is reimbursed when bottles are returned for washing and refilling, are leaders in reuse and are featured on postcards to send to state legislators and Coca-Cola bottlers from the Story of Stuff's "Bring Back Refill" campaign.

The Story of Stuff, a Bay Area-based non-profit, focuses on creating a more healthy and just world. Its "Bring Back Refill" campaign encourages corporate responsibility through the adoption of refillable bottles and advocates for government policies to increase refillable packaging.

"Plastic beverage bottles are one of the most littered items," said Alexandria Choy, the group's digital campaigns manager. "They end up in landfills, in our rivers and oceans, and in our bodies as microplastics. But there's a solution: refillable bottles."

Coca-Cola, the world's largest soft drink manufacturer, was once the trailblazer in providing refillable glass bottles in the US. In 1929, Coca-Cola bottlers put a 2¢ deposit on a 5¢ beverage to ensure the return of the glass bottle. 96% of those bottles were returned, refilled, and reused. However, the introduction of single-use cans in the 1960s, followed by PET (polyethylene terephthalate) plastic bottles in the 1970s, led Coca-Cola to wind down refillable bottling operations, the last of which closed its doors in 2012.

In 2022, Coca-Cola (including affiliated brands such as Dasani, Sprite, Minute Maid, Powerade, and Fanta) pledged to sell 25% of its products in reusable containers by 2030, but backed down two years later, instead saying it "intends to continue to invest in refillable packaging where infrastructure already exists."

One such place is El Paso, Texas. The *El Paso Business Journal* reported on a program for glass Coke bottles involving about 130 businesses, which boasts a bottle return rate of about 74%. Bottles are picked up by Coca-Cola Southwest Beverages, undergo sanitization and cleaning at a bottling plant across the border in Ciudad Juárez, then are refilled and sent back out to participating businesses.

Problems with single-use plastic bottles

Single-use plastic beverage bottles are a major source of plastic pollution and waste. Data collected in 44 countries between 2018 and 2022 by 14,760 volunteers organized by the #breakfreefromplastic movement showed that plastic bottles were the most common plastic item found on beaches worldwide. Coca-Cola was consistently the number one brand associated with plastic pollution.

The production of plastic bottles has serious health and climate consequences. A study of the chemical footprint of a plastic bottle published in 2023 by Defend Our Health found that all along its chemical supply chain, PET plastic pollutes air, water, and food

with cancer-causing chemicals. PET plastic is the top polluter among all industries across the U.S. for three carcinogens: ethylene oxide in the air, 1,4-dioxane in drinking water, and antimony in food and beverages. The PET plastic supply chain also emits nearly nine million metric tons of greenhouse gases in North America every year, equal to the annual emissions of two million cars.

Benefits of refillable glass bottles

Studies have shown that reusable glass bottles achieve greenhouse gas reductions compared to single-use in just a few cycles. Glass can also be recycled many times, and it's safer for food products.

Deposit Return Systems (DRS) not only have positive impacts on the environment, but create many more jobs, too, according to the Container Recycling Institute and others, in curbside collection, sorting, and transport as compared to garbage collection, hauling, and landfilling. Such systems can also lower the cost of packaging, as Matt Swihart of Double Mountain Brewery in Hood River, Oregon confirmed.

"Even with costs associated with shipping and cleaning, our reusable bottles are about 60% of the cost of new glass," he said.

Help bring this solution to California

- Learn more about the 'Bring Back Refill' campaign at <https://www.storyofstuff.org/plastic/bring-back-refill/>
- Purchase household goods in refillable containers at Napa's two refilleries: Juniper Station and Good Pantry

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW!

Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens' group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area.

Info, napa.350bayare.org

Photo Caption: Coca-Cola bottles being collected for refill in El Paso, Texas

Photo Credit: El Paso Business Journal

