



The impact of COVID-19 on deposit systems in Quebec, Canada, the US and Europe

Original publication on May 21, 2020

Last updated on July 20, 2020 - One-time interruptions and service resuming announcements on that date

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Overall Situation

The COVID-19 crisis has hit container deposit systems hard in Quebec, Canada and the United States, while in Europe the situation varies from one country to another.

Several jurisdictions concerned with the potential health risks of recovering used containers chose to temporarily reduce or suspend the application of their programs, thereby giving trustee organizations a chance to determine whether they could continue providing the service.

Faced with a sudden surge in demand for non-perishable foods and household products, and feeling that it was impossible to manage health risks for their employees and customers, a great number of food retailers chose to stop accepting refundable containers.

Because households have been storing refundable containers due to the confinement, there has been a marked decline in the quantity of recovered refundable containers, thereby jeopardizing reuse and recycling markets for these containers.

The purpose of this report is to provide a more detailed portrait of the current situation and specifically, of the impacts of COVID-19 on refunds or deposit systems in Quebec, the rest of Canada, the United States and Europe, in order to measure the nature and scope of those impacts and highlight the solutions implemented in response to the crisis.



Situation in Québec

In Quebec, RECYC-QUÉBEC is the organization mandated by the government to apply the Act respecting the sale and distribution of beer and soft drinks in non-refundable containers. At the beginning of the crisis, as a precaution to protect the public from the coronavirus, the state-owned corporation recommended that consumers keep their refundable containers at home¹.

Concerned about employees handling containers, an accumulation of containers contaminated with saliva in container crushers, and given the difficulty of respecting physical distancing near those machines and courtesy counters, several food industry retailers had stopped accepting refundable containers and wanted to temporarily suspend the legal obligation to recover them, while finding an alternative solution to avoid that they end up in landfills².

Following the government of Quebec's decree on essential services and after consulting with public health authorities, RECYC-QUÉBEC issued a directive on March 25 asking retailers to resume the recovery of refundable bottles and cans.



The following instructions regarding returnable containers³ at retailers are provided on RECYC-QUÉBEC's website:

- Deposit-refund, as well as related activities, are maintained.
- Retailers must ensure that their employees are adequately informed regarding hygiene measures to be taken and provide them with the necessary equipment. Employees who handle containers should wear gloves, remove these adequately and wash their hands frequently. Surfaces and equipment should be disinfected frequently.
- Retailers are asked to collaborate so that the containers do not end up in the garbage.
- Retailers can refer to the [Interim recommendations for grocery stores and essential businesses](#) published by the Institut national de santé publique du Québec.

Pursuant to a notice from the Ministry of Health and Social Services indicating that it deemed the handling of used containers to be without risk, and with brewers being unable to retrieve their bottles, thus jeopardizing their ability to continue supplying the Quebec market, the Minister of the Environment and the Fight Against Climate Change asked merchant associations to respect legislation in the matter⁴. Reiterating that food retailers had neither the staff nor the logistics to manage containers returned to their stores in compliance with health standards, the Association des détaillants en alimentation du Québec (ADA) suggested that recovery by customers might take place outside stores, on appropriate sites, such as containers, parking lots or arenas, indicating that having a collector refund the deposit could benefit community organizations.⁵

Also, in order to be able to resume the deposit-refund, beer delivery truckers requested that bottles be "quarantined" for several days in order to eliminate the risk of COVID-19 contamination.⁶

On May 7, the Minister of the Environment and the Fight Against Climate Change, Benoit Charette, called in brewers, retailers and government officials in order to "quickly" reach an agreement regarding the return of refundable containers.¹



On May 9 and 10, some retailers, including 41 from the Maxi chain, carried out one-off refundable container recovery operations in the parking lots of their stores, in many cases for the benefit of local community organizations⁷. These "major drives" were supported by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW/TUAC) union, which represents 35,000 workers in Quebec. On May 11, the Minister of the Environment and the Fight Against Climate Change, RECYC-QUÉBEC, retailers, convenience stores and brewers announced a progressive recovery plan for deposit-refund activities, with temporary conditions for recovering refundable containers will fully took effect the week of May 18⁸. These terms included the following elements:

- "Whenever possible, retailers will take back consigned containers brought in by the population in outdoor areas located in parking lots.
- When recovering on their premises is not possible, retailers have agreed to organize major drive operations in municipal areas or in shopping mall parking lots in collaboration with community and municipal organizations.
- Recovery operations can prioritize the collection of containers like refillable beer bottles, in collaboration with the appropriate brewers and collectors."⁹

On May 28, "in spite of sincere and considerable efforts on the part of retailers," the government called on "the limited resumption of refundable container returns (...) [as well as] important economic and environmental consequences"¹⁰ and announced the full resumption of refundable container returns as of June 8 for all Quebec retailers, except for those in Montréal, where the resumption has been announced for June 22.

Situation in the rest of Canada¹¹

Everywhere in Canada, federal and provincial authorities have taken drastic measures to fight the pandemic. The federal government invoked the Emergencies Act; provinces and territories invoked their respective emergency legislation and health recommendations. The public health emergency situation affected programs and operations for container deposit-refund systems all across Canada. An overview of these impacts was largely guided by reports published in the April and May, 2020, issues of The Stewardship Gazette and was supplemented by information provided on the websites of provincial governments and designated deposit-refund management organizations.

Status Report by Province and Territory

Status Report		Details
Ontario	Complete closure followed by reopening	<p>- The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) temporarily suspended product returns and cut business hours. It then announced opening hours would be extended at 360 points of sale as of May 14.</p> <p>Beer stores¹² :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> On March 18, The Beer Store chain announced it was suspending the recovery of empty containers in all its stores from March 19 to 31. On April 1, the chain announced the partial resumption of empty container recovery activities in 73 of its points of sale as of April 6, and a change in opening hours from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday to Saturday (limit of one cart of empty containers per visit). It also announced it was setting up a <i>drive-through service</i> for the deposit of containers in 7 distribution centers open on Sundays as of April 5. As of Monday, April 27, The Beer Store expanded the deposit return program to over 200 retail locations, representing about 50 per cent of the total number of stores across the province. On June 1, the program was reinstated in most retail points of sale, though some on certain days of the week only. Media¹³ reported that the shortage of refillable glass bottles being returned has caused beer brand owners to plan to shift a portion of their output from glass bottles to aluminum cans.

Status Report		Details
British Columbia	Partial closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At March 31st, BC Liquor Store had stopped accepting empty beverage liquor and wine containers. On June 1st, the company announced that customers could start using their reusable containers, bags and boxes, but that they would have to bag their purchases themselves, without placing reusable containers on counter surfaces. - Return-It, Encorp Pacific's deposit system, has seen roughly 50% of the 171 depots close at the beginning of April - about 17% of the depots were still closed at the beginning of May. - In response to the pandemic, Return-it initially promoted its three, convenient, unstaffed Express & GO drop-off stations. On July 6th, the organization announced a series of initiatives to modernize the deposit and mitigate risk of exposure of employees to COVID-19, including, specifically, the application of a \$0,10 deposit fee for all beverage containers, regardless of size, the allowance of other forms of refund payment than cash, as well as the expansion of its Return-It Express and Express & Go stations.¹⁴
Prairies		
Status Report		Details
Alberta	Partial closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Beverage Container Management Board gave the Depots the permission to close if they determined that it was appropriate. - At the beginning of April, there were about 60 Alberta depots who had voluntarily closed and other 20 who had chosen to reduce their operating hours. At the beginning of May, 26 depots were closed and 64 Depots (of 220 total depots) were operating under reduced hours. - At May 25, 7 depots were still closed and 50 were operating under reduced hours. - The Alberta Bottle Depot Association stated that about 185 million containers were sent to recycling corporations in April 2019, a number that fell to 113 million containers in 2020¹⁵. The Alberta Beverage Container Corporation was expecting that 190 million containers would be recovered in May, the second highest volume for that month in over 30 years.

Status Report		Details
Saskatchewan	Reopening after complete closure	<p>- SARCAN depots closed to the public as of March 21st. On May 22nd, the Health Minister authorised the resumption of activities by SARCAN. The reopening of deposit points was carried out in two phases: June 8th for major customers and MRFs and June 15th for the public.</p> <p>- Reopening is scheduled for June 15th.</p> <p>- In the meantime, most of the depots and plants had no staff on site and were involved only in routine check-ins on facilities occurring for insurance purposes.</p>
Manitoba	Ongoing operations	<p>- The beverage recovery system in Manitoba is different from those in other provinces and territories. Beverage producers supplying into the Manitoba market are charged a Container Recycling Fee, which funds the entire operation including infrastructure, signage, technical support, and promotion and education. In addition, the funds pay for up to 80 per cent of the cost to collect; sort and market used beverage containers in residential recycling programs. As a result, residents in Manitoba are still able to carry on as normal and recycle their beverage containers in the residential system.</p>
Maritimes provinces		
Status Report		Details
New-Brunswick	Gradual reopening after complete closure	<p>- The public health emergency forced Encorp Atlantique to cease its activities in the 69 returnable containers refund centres in the province.¹⁶ On May 10, it was announced that refund centres could resume activities immediately and that the decision to deal with fewer personnel and have fewer opening hours, or to take more time before reopening in order to meet Public health requirements, all were at the discretion of refund center owner and managers¹⁷.</p> <p>Encorp Atlantic chose to provide financial assistance to refund centres in the form of advances on their handling fees.</p> <p>- Since April 1, 2020, many beverage containers that were previously excluded from the New Brunswick Beverage Container Management Program (PGRB) are now refundable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milkshakes, protein shakes, drinkable yogurts, drinkable kefir, eggnog and other drinks containing dairy products. • Plant milks (soy, almond, oat, cashew, rice, pea, etc.) - any drink of this type that is NOT ENRICHED is automatically subject to a deposit-refund. • Sports drinks like protein drinks and electrolyte drinks.

Status Report		Details
Nova-Scotia	Partial closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Starting March 23, Divert NS has closed their processing centre but continued to service the Enviro-Depots that remained open. At the beginning of May, about 20 depots out of 75 continued to operate in Nova Scotia.¹⁸ - Retailers or distributors encountering difficulties reporting or remitting payments are encouraged to contact Divert NS to discuss arrangements on a case-by-case basis.
PEI	Reopening after partial closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nine of the ten depots in the province were closed at the beginning of April. - All deposits were opened at the beginning of June, some operating with reduced staff or hours.
Newfoundland and Labrador	Reopening after complete closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Although beverage container redemption centers are not listed among businesses required to close, the Multi-Materials Stewardship Board (MMSB) has announced that all 56 Green Depots are closed to the public, citing "direction from the Provincial Government under the Public Health Protection and Promotion Act"¹⁹. - Some Green Depots will resume operations starting the week of May 11, 2020²⁰, moving to an Xpress only model of service and implementing several precautions to ensure physical distancing and safety of staff. Traditional counter service, where a customer waits for their order to be counted followed by their cash payment, is suspended until Newfoundland and Labrador enters COVID-19 Alert Level 3.
Territories		
Status Report		Détails
Nunavut	Impact unknown	
Territoires du Nord-Ouest	Reopening after complete closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All recycling depots and processing centres closed on March 19, 2020. Reopening authorised as of May 15. - A support measure for collection and recycling centres aimed to compensate operators directly for the loss of revenue. - For recycling centers, a one-time payment of \$ 5,000 was made, while affected personnel and operators had to turn to federal government assistance.²¹
Yukon	Reopening after complete closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - After complete closure, Raven Recycling and P&M Recycling deposit points resumed activities as of May 19.²²

Situation in the United States

In the United States, 10 States, as well as the territory of Guam, have established deposit-refund systems for beverage containers through laws known as "bottle bills".²³ With the exception of Hawaii, where refundable container recovery continues as usual, all States with deposit-refund systems have responded to the COVID-19 crisis by maintaining current laws, while announcing either that requirements for returnable containers collection are lifted, or that measures to enforce the law regarding deposit-refund for retailers are suspended. In Michigan, deposit services had to be suspended as they were deemed not essential. The status report presented in this section is taken from the study "Impacts of COVID-19 on U.S. Recycling Programs", commissioned by Éco Entreprises Québec at the Boston-based Product Stewardship Institute.

Overall, we learn that the supply of glass, aluminum and plastic containers has decreased considerably. For example, the supply of used cans has dropped 50 to 80% in key States like Michigan and California, and other containers have followed a similar trend.



This decrease in the supply of recycled material from deposit-refund and commercial activities, combined with the large increase in the volume of recycled materials from residential curbside recycling, have caused major changes for processors. About 40% of the recycled aluminium and 60% of the cullet used to make cans, bottles and jars in the United States usually come from deposit-refund programs, while materials from curbside recycling tends to be shipped to durable goods markets, such as automotive manufacturing. While the demand for the manufacturing of durable goods has greatly decreased due to the pandemic, the demand for packaging has followed the increase in sales of packaged food, beverages and cleaning products.

To remain operational, packaging manufacturers have therefore started to accept materials from curbside recycling. For example, CarbonLite, a major "bottle-to-bottle" recycler whose supply normally relies exclusively on PET recovered through the deposit-refund system for its California plant, now gets 60% of its raw materials from residential sources. This change made it necessary to hire additional manual sorters in order to deal with greater contamination of materials. Other facilities that previously relied on deposit-refund materials have had to reduce their operations, such as one of New England Strategic Materials' factories, where the supply of glass has dropped by 60% to 80%.

Status Report by State

Status Report		Details
California (CA)	Requirements suspended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Renewal of the 60-day Suspension of requirements for retailers to accept bottle returns: guide issued by: CalRecycle Guidance to Recycling Centers and Beverage Retailers per Governor Newsom's Executive Order N-54-20 and Executive Order N-70-20. - Beverage dealers in unserved convenience zones that are currently required to either redeem empty beverage containers ("Option A") or pay \$100 per day to CalRecycle ("Option B") were relieved of this obligation from April 22 to June 21, 2020, and for a further 60 days as of June 22, 2020. They may continue to redeem empty beverage containers at their discretion and in accordance with federal, state, and local physical distancing guidelines and safety requirements.
Connecticut (CT)	Restart of activities after enforcement suspended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effective March 17, 2020, the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) temporarily suspended enforcement actions against Connecticut retailers for failing to accept empty beverage containers for redemption. - On May 6, the DEEP announced that as of May 20, Connecticut retailers who did not accept refundable containers would again be subject to the measures provided for by law. Retailers planned to resume their activities in that regard, on a limited basis on May 20, with activities resuming in full at the latest June 3.²⁴ - According to Tomra, over 90% of retailers refused to take back refundable containers during the suspension period.²⁵
Hawaii (HI)	Program is active	Hawaii is the only bottle deposit state that so far has not made an announcement suspending redemptions or enforcement.
Iowa (IA)	Requirements suspended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Executive Proclamation of Disaster Emergency: The Governor suspends regulatory provisions requiring "a dealer to accept an empty beverage container on which an Iowa deposit was made". - This suspension, first ordered on March 17, was extended in section 124 of the proclamation by the Governor on May 26, 2020²⁶, and section 109 of the proclamation by the Governor on June 25, 2020²⁷ and indicated that "Iowans and retailers should not expect the suspension to be prolonged beyond July 25, 2020, and retailers can choose to accept empty beverage containers ahead of this date, with limits on the number of containers per customer or hours when containers will be accepted, in order to restart the deposit system." - Iowa grocers had hoped that this temporary suspension would become permanent, and they believe curbside recycling would be best.²⁸

Maine (ME)	Enforcement suspended	<p>- Effective Wednesday, March 18, 2020, Maine Department of Environmental Protection has temporarily refrain from enforcement activity involving Maine retailers, and redemption centers for failing to accept beverage containers for redemption.</p> <p>- Maine Recycling and Returnable Services (TOMRA) and CLYNK continued operating and collecting from redemption centers.</p>
Massachusetts (MA)	Requirements reapplied after enforcement had been suspended	<p>MA Department of Environmental Protection: Massachusetts to Temporarily Suspend Bottle Redemption Enforcement. In partnership with the Attorney General's Office, MassDEP temporarily suspended the enforcement of bottle redemption requirements throughout the state as of March 18. In partnership with the Attorney General's Office, the Massachusetts Department of Environment Protection (MassDEP) will resume enforcement of beverage container redemption requirements in two phases:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enforcement of redemption requirements will resume at retailers using reverse vending machines (RVMs) on June 5, 2020. 2. Enforcement of redemption requirements will resume at retailers accepting containers over-the-counter on June 19, 2020.²⁹
Michigan (MI)	Reopening after requirement to close	<p>- Executive Order 2020-21 (COVID-19) establishes a “temporary requirement to suspend activities that are not necessary to sustain or protect life,” which exempts “trash pick-up and disposal.” Neither recycling nor the return of bottles to redeem a deposit are mentioned in the list of allowable activities. This order took effect on March 24, 2020 at 12:01 am. It was followed by Executive Order 2020-42, 2020-59 and 2020-70, extending its effect through May 15, 2020 at 11:59 pm.</p> <p>- The Frequently Asked Questions of these executive orders clarify that “although bottle return services are often located within grocery and convenience stores, they are not considered critical infrastructure.”</p> <p>- As per guidelines from Michigan's Treasury Department, all supermarkets equipped with refundable container reverse vending machines located at the front of stores or in a separate area must accept returns at the latest June 15. Retailers may take one or all of the following measures to control the influx of refundable containers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Limit the number of beverage containers that can be returned per person per day to a refund amount of \$25. o Set up special or limited opening hours o Limit the number of RVMs available and operational. o Periodically close recovery installations as needed, for cleaning and procurement management. <p>- Implement any other procedure or restriction deemed necessary or advisable by the retailer to promote safety and/or efficiency.³⁰</p>
New York (NY)	Requirements reapplied after enforcement had been suspended	<p>The DEC emphasized that it considered beverage redemption an essential service. After briefly loosening application measures for facilities unable to fulfill redemption operations due to resource restrictions during the pandemic, it expected that those facilities would take the necessary measures to regain their responsibilities and ensure compliance by June 3.³¹</p>

Oregon (OR)	Requirements gradually reapplied after enforcement had been suspended	<p>- <u>Oregon Liquor Control Commission: Extension Again Made to Bottle Bill Reprieve</u>. Following an initial reprieve and subsequent extension, the OR LCC extended the non-enforcement of redemption requirements for OR retailers choosing not to accept containers for redemption. The temporary period of non-enforcement began March 15 and will now stay in effect until May 31, 2020. As of June 1, 2020, the commission will link the enforcement of Bottle Bill compliance to the phase a county is in and will re-start its compliance enforcement at the latest two weeks after a county enters phase 1 of deconfinement.</p> <p>- BottleDrop redemption centers, operated by the Oregon Beverage Recycling Cooperative (OBRC) remained open and OBRC also continued to operate BottleDrop Express drop sites, and Dealer Redemption Centers, but overall returns reached only 45% of their usual volumes³².</p>
Vermont (VT)	Enforcement suspended	<p><u>Agency of Natural Resources: COVID-19 and Redemption of Vermont's Bottle Bill Containers</u>: Temporarily suspends enforcement action against retailers or redemption centers who fail to redeem beverage containers subject to VT's bottle bill law. Effective March 18, this temporary period will end on April 30, 2020 unless extended by DEC.</p> <p>- According to Resource Recycling, the suspension of application measures was to end on June 15³³.</p>

Situation in Europe

Based on contributions received from Member States, stakeholders and other European Commission departments, the European Union published a document titled “Waste management in the context of the coronavirus crisis³⁴” on April 14, specifying the following regarding the management of municipal waste:

“In view of the importance of proper waste management to human health and the environment and taking into account risk assessments performed by scientific bodies and applicable risk management measures, the overall continuity of proper municipal waste management services, including separate collection and recycling, is to be safeguarded in line with EU law.”

The application of these recommendations, however, varies from one country to another.

Most Scandinavian countries, for example, have maintained their usual services without significant changes, whereas the Netherlands³⁵ have announced that the deposit-refund system would be broadened as of July 1, 2021.

In Estonia³⁶, for example, we see a decline in service and the temporary closure of collection points. Scotland will be postponing the implementation of its deposit-refund system by more than a year: originally scheduled for April, 2021, it will now take place in July, 2022³⁷. Even Germany³⁸ has a hard time recovering containers, as consumers stocked up on bottled water and alcoholic beverages to last through the confinement period and are not returning their bottles quickly enough, a situation which promptly restarted the debate about increasing refund amounts to boost consumer’s incentive to return containers.

Research on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on European deposit-refund systems will continue, therefore, as regional differences are greater there than they are in North America.

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