

RECYCLING IN RHODE ISLAND

TURN THE TIDE ON OUR BROKEN RECYCLING SYSTEM

Rhode Island is facing an environmental crisis exacerbated by litter proliferation and an overflowing landfill. These challenges stem from an outdated recycling system.

CHALLENGE

OUTDATED RECYCLING SYSTEM



RECYCLABLE MATERIAL LOST TO LANDFILL

Each year, 121,000 tons of recyclables go to the Central Landfill, which is expected to be full in 2046. Nearly a quarter of these recyclables were put into a recycling bin and then sent to the landfill due to contamination. In Providence alone, 648 pounds of collected recyclables per household were rejected in 2024 and sent to the near-capacity landfill, costing taxpayers \$1.14 million in fees.



LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT RECYCLING SYSTEM

The recycling rate in RI is only 26% although 80% of households have access. This disconnect is due to contamination from mixed materials and food residue, as well as a lack of participation among residents. The recycling rate even fails to meet the 35% recycling mandate.



PERSISTENT LITTER PROBLEMS

Litter remains a major problem in RI, from highways like I-95 to public spaces like Roger Williams Park and the Providence River. In the fall of 2023 alone, Save the Bay collected more than 135,000 pieces of trash, and the Rhode Island Department of Transportation spends \$800,000 annually on litter cleanup along roadways.

Recyclable, yet often littered, beverage containers make up a sizable portion of the materials polluting roadsides, parks, and shorelines.

HOW CAN RI ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES?

A special joint legislative commission on plastic bottle waste held 13 meetings between September 2023 and March 2025. The diverse membership of lawmakers, business representatives, and environmental advocates heard and studied written expert testimony from more than 20 groups and individuals. The commission's report made three recommendations:

- 1** Consider **combining both an extended producer responsibility (EPR) and bottle bill (BB)** to produce a world class recycling system that both addresses litter and improves recycling generally.
- 2** Consider creating a **BB** for beverage containers.
- 3** Consider creating an **EPR program** for statewide recycling of packaging and printed paper.

SOLUTION

COMBINED EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY AND BOTTLE BILL LEGISLATION

RI can dramatically improve recycling outcomes by passing comprehensive high-performance recycling, like [HB 6207](#), integrating these two proven approaches:

- 1** **Bottle Bill:** A BB places a refundable deposit on beverage containers when purchased, which incentivizes consumers to return empty beverage containers for a refund. Once returned, containers are recycled or reused. Unlike the antiquated BBs in neighboring states, a modern BB uses technology to enable quick redemption at convenient locations.
- 2** **Extended Producer Responsibility:** EPR is a policy that holds producers accountable for the entire lifecycle of their materials and products, including the cost to collect and process recyclables. This is achieved by shifting the cost of recycling programs from municipalities to producers.

BENEFITS FOR RI



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS

- **Increases Recycling Rates:** Achieves higher recycling rates from 26% to as high as 75% for all packaging and paper products and beyond 90% for beverage containers.
- **Reduces Litter:** Dramatically decreases beverage container litter. One national [study](#) found substantially more bottle bill material litter per capita in non-bottle bill states than in bottle bill states, by a difference of two-to-one.
- **Reduces Landfill Waste:** Return millions of dollars in recyclables back into the market and out of the near-capacity landfill.
- **Lowers Carbon Footprint:** Reduces reliance on new materials to make beverage containers, which helps reduce emissions.
- **Protects Communities and Natural Habitats:** Prevents pollution in communities, along roads, in parks, and in waterways.



ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENTS

- **Creates Green Jobs:** Boosts recycling and waste employment, infrastructure, and wages. One [study](#) found BBs create 11 to 38 times more jobs than a curbside recycling system for beverage containers.
- **Enables Better Budget Management:** Extends the life of the Central Landfill rather than paying to ship trash out-of-state or build a new landfill.
- **Saves Taxpayers Money:** Lowers litter cleanup and landfill disposal charges, as well as shift from municipalities to industry the cost of recycling collection, which is an estimated \$15.6 million per year.
- **Strengthens Domestic Supply Chains:** Helps ensure high-quality, domestic material is recycled properly. This helps meet recycled content goals and advances a circular economy.