

Brown needs to rescue California's recycling programs

Recycling sorting facilities remind me of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Inside is a whirl of activity: thousands of metal, plastic, paper and glass objects being transported along conveyor belts. Workers pull trash and heavy objects off the line. You can see environmental progress in front of your eyes. At the end of the line, huge bales of recycled product are ready for their new life.

Recycling bottles and cans is now second nature because it works. In large measure, this success is thanks to the Bottle Bill, California's 30-year-old recycling law that brought us the nickel and dime deposit program. Recycling is a critical action each of us takes to reduce greenhouse gases, conserve natural resources and help keep communities and coastlines clean.

Unfortunately, if urgent action isn't taken this month in Sacramento, the recycling of 64 million single-use beverage containers our state uses every day could be trashed.

Recycling doesn't happen without strong financial underpinnings. Most of us redeem the nickel and dime beverage deposit for cash. This



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motivates us to recycle. The deposits that don't get redeemed go into a fund administered by CalRecycle to reimburse recyclers when scrap metal, plastic and glass prices hit rock bottom.

In early 2016, California's public and private recycling infrastructure began hemorrhaging upward of \$2 million per month, due to record low material scrap prices. Rather than coming to the rescue, CalRecycle stopped all payments. Even though the money was in place and the law gave CalRecycle the mandate, state lawyers said new language had to be authorized.

The response of the marketplace was swift. Within days of CalRecycle announcing the freeze in payments, the places around California that collect bottles and cans and return our deposit felt the pain. The largest operator of these "convenience zones," rePlanet,

announced the closing of 191 centers and the layoff of 278 employees. Others followed suit, and by April 2016, more than 400 centers had closed.

Efforts by stakeholders and the Assembly to address the problem in the 2016-17 state budget were ultimately opposed the Governor's Office, amid vague calls for a more "comprehensive reform."

Today, the promised reform proposal from the Governor's Office has yet to materialize. Closures have exceeded 560 recycling centers - roughly 25 percent of the infrastructure. Revenue loss to public and private recycling operators is on track to exceed \$50 million by the end of June, at the same time the program's year-end "fund balance" is expected to top \$250 million. As a result, recycling rates have fallen below 80 percent for the first time since 2008.

While the Governor's Office and legislators debate details, this self-inflicted failure means every day 2 million containers are littered or sent to a landfill, including more than 1 million plastic bottles every day. The Pacific Ocean does not need any more plastic pollution. This is insane.

The loss of recycling centers has hit rural areas

especially hard. For consumers who try to supplement family income by redeeming containers, the loss of buyback locations has reduced total redemption payback by more than \$3 million per month.

The governor's proposed 2017-18 budget presents a critical opportunity for policymakers to come together and fix what's been broken: Use surplus program revenue to return recycling center funding to 2015 levels, and provide supplemental funding to reopen closed rural centers. It should include a timeline for closing loopholes and require beer and soft drink makers to cover at least half the cost of recycling their containers, less than 5 cents per container.

As recently as 2013, the California Bottle Bill was humming along at an 85 percent recycling rate, diverting more than 1 million tons of plastic, glass and metal, and contributing thousands of jobs and more than \$2 billion to the state's economy, while delivering the equivalent of 1.45 million tons of reduced carbon dioxide emissions. The Trump EPA is working to dismantle environmental programs across the country. Let's not make their job easier by neglecting fixes to the nation's best recycling program.

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