
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Senator Blakespear, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 955
Author: Blakespear
Version: 3/18/2026
Urgency: Yes
Consultant: Alyssa Poletti

Hearing Date: 4/8/2026
Fiscal: Yes

SUBJECT: Beverage containers: supermarkets: reverse vending machines

DIGEST: This bill precludes a reverse vending machine from serving a convenience zone. This bill also redefines “supermarket” to grocery stores with more than \$5 million of gross annual sales regardless of the presence of a bakery or deli.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Establishes the California Beverage Container Recycling and Litter Reduction Act (Bottle Bill), which requires beverage containers, as defined, to have a California redemption value (CRV) of 5 cents for containers that hold fewer than 24 ounces and 10 cents for containers that hold 24 ounces or more. Requires beverage distributors to pay a redemption payment to CalRecycle for every beverage container sold in the state. Provides that these funds are continuously appropriated to CalRecycle for, among other things, the payment of refund values and processing payments. (Public Resources Code (PRC) § 14500 *et seq.*)
- 2) Defines convenience zones as a 1-mile radius around a supermarket (PRC § 14509.4), or a 3- to 5-mile radius in rural areas (PRC § 14571.5)
- 3) Requires there to be at least one certified recycling center or location within every convenience zone which pays the full refund price for all types of empty CRV containers and is open for business at least 30 hours per week, with a minimum of 5 hours and maximum of 50% of its hours of operation occurring during periods other than Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm to be “served” (PRC § 14571 (a)). Allows recycling centers to operate fewer than 30 hours in rural areas or on an alternative schedule with approval from CalRecycle (PRC § 14571 (c)).

- 4) Requires beverage dealers in unserved convenience zones to redeem CRV containers at the register (PRC § 14571.6).
- 5) Establishes dealer cooperative program through SB 1013 (Atkins, Chapter 610, Statutes of 2022) through which beverage dealers may collectively arrange for the collection of beverage containers. Requires that dealer cooperatives redeem all beverage types and submit a redemption plan to CalRecycle for approval. (PRC § 14578 *et seq.*)
- 6) Requires CalRecycle to pay handling fees to supermarket sites, non-profit convenience zone recyclers, and rural region recyclers to provide an incentive for the redemption of empty beverage containers in a convenience zone (PRC § 14585).
- 7) Requires the following for a reverse vending machine to be considered a certified recycling center, through AB 1311 (Wood, Chapter 506, Statutes of 2021):
 - a) accepts all empty beverage containers; or
 - b) provides an attendant to accept all containers that the reverse vending machine cannot accept (such as large containers or pouches); and
 - c) operates a minimum of 30 hours per week. (PRC § 14571 (f-j))
- 8) Defines a “supermarket” as “a full-line, self-service retail store with gross annual sales of two million dollars (\$2,000,000), or more, and which sells a line of dry grocery, canned goods, or nonfood items and some perishable items. For purposes of determining which dealers are supermarkets, the department shall use the annual updates of the Progressive Grocer Marketing Guidebook and any computer printouts developed in conjunction with the guidebook.” (PRC § 14526.5).

This bill:

- 1) Defines supermarkets as a full-line, self-service retail store which:
 - a) Has at least five million dollars of gross annual sales;
 - b) Sells a line of groceries, canned goods, alcoholic or nonalcoholic beverages, nonfood items, or some perishable items; and
 - c) Regardless of whether the retail store operates a bakery or deli
- 2) Stipulates that a reverse vending machine:
 - a) Shall not make an unserved convenience zone served;

- b) Shall not preclude a dealer cooperative (pursuant to Section 14578) or a mobile unit (pursuant to Section 2000) from operating or receiving payments in the same convenience zone; and
 - c) Shall not make an existing recycling center ineligible for handling fees pursuant to Section 14585(c).
- 3) Includes an urgency clause.

Background

- 1) *Bottle bill background.* The bottle bill was established through legislation in 1986 (AB 2020 Margolin, Chapter 1290, Statutes of 1986) with the joint goals of reducing litter and achieving an 80% recycling rate for all CRV containers in the program. In 2025, CalRecycle reported a 70% recycling rate for CRV containers in the “Biannual Report of Beverage Container Sales, Returns, Redemption, and Recycling Rates.” While the program does not encompass all containers, it does encompass most beverage containers made from glass, plastic, aluminum, and bimetal (consisting of one or more metals).

The bottle bill operates by adding a 5-25 cent CRV payment to beverage containers in the program. Beverage distributors pay CRV on all new beverage containers they sell in California into the Beverage Container Recycling Fund (BCRF). Distributors then pass the cost of the CRV on to retailers, who in turn pass that 5-25 cents per bottle on to consumers at checkout. Individuals and businesses are incentivized to return bottles to recycling centers where they can redeem the value of the CRV. Once a consumer is ready to dispose of a bottle, they can return bottles to a certified recycling center and redeem their CRV, or consumers can put their bottles in residential curbside recycling collection, wherein the curbside programs, not consumers, keep the CRV on these containers. The redemption rate (the rate at which CRV containers are returned at recycling centers and supermarkets) was 60% for 2024.¹ According to a CalRecycle 2022 Fact Sheet, curbside programs collect about 12% of CRV containers.²

- 2) *Recycling center scarcity.* The Beverage Container Recycling Program (BCRP) has long struggled with providing an adequate number of recycling centers for consumers wanting to return their bottles and receive CRV money. The BCRP requires CalRecycle to set convenience zones and requires that each convenience zone have at least one certified recycling center. A convenience

¹ Container Recycling Institute (2025) *Bottle Bill Resource Guide: California*, <https://www.bottlebill.org/index.php/current-and-proposed-laws/usa/california>

² CalRecycle (2023) *Beverage Container Recycling in California Fact Sheet Calendar Year 2022* (DRRR-2023-1726), <https://www2.calrecycle.ca.gov/Docs/Publications/Details/1726>

zone is typically a 1-mile radius around a large supermarket in an urban area and a 3- to 5-mile radius in a rural area. Convenience zones without certified recycling centers are considered “unserved.” Dealers, any retailer which sells CRV containers, are required to collect and provide redemption for CRV if they are in unserved zones.

California currently has approximately 1,200 certified recycling centers (or buy back centers) across the state.^{2,3} Many rural counties have only one or two recycling centers to service large geographic areas. Alpine and Sierra County have none.⁴ The shortage of recycling centers has been exacerbated over the last decade. Between 2014 to 2024, approximately half of California’s recycling centers closed.⁵ One major example was rePlanet, the largest recycling network in California at the time, which closed all 284 of its recycling centers in the state in 2019.⁶

Though dealers are required to redeem CRV containers if they are in an unserved convenience zone, this does not always happen. Without proper communication to customers (and enforcement from CalRecycle), customers might not realize they can redeem beverage containers at the cash register. If recycling centers are scarce or lack capacity, not only do recycling rates decline, but consumers are left without an opportunity to recover the 5-25 cents per bottle they paid up-front at check-out.

- 3) *Supermarkets and beverage dealers.* A supermarket is defined as a “full-line, self-service retail store with gross annual sales of two million dollars (\$2,000,000), or more, and which sells a line of dry grocery, canned goods, or nonfood items and some perishable items,” in conjunction with the Progressive Grocers Guidebook (PRC § 14526, California Code of Regulations (CCR) Tit. 14, § 17987.2). The Progressive Grocer Guidebook is a useful tool which provides estimates of gross sales of food retail locations and whether those locations carry a full line of groceries. Notably, the Progressive Grocery Guide is a proprietary, industry tool which is not openly available.

Additionally, there is an important distinction between supermarkets and dealers. All supermarkets are dealers, but not all dealers are supermarkets.

³ CalRecycle (2025) *Beverage Container Recycling in California Fact Sheet Calendar Year 2023* (DRRR-2025-1749), <https://www2.calrecycle.ca.gov/Docs/Publications/Details/1750>

⁴ CalRecycle (2026) *Beverage Container Recycling Centers*, <https://www2.calrecycle.ca.gov/BevContainer/RecyclingCenters/>

⁵ Rodd, S. (2024) *Diminishing returns: California’s unclaimed bottle deposits hit \$820M as recycling centers close*, KPBS, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/environment/2024/06/20/californias-unclaimed-bottle-deposits-820m-recycling-centers-close>

⁶ Toto, D. (2019) *California’s rePlanet closes CRV redemption network*, Recycling Today, <https://www.recyclingtoday.com/news/replanet-closes-california-crv-redemption-network/>

Supermarkets are both beverage dealers and anchor convenience zones. Within a convenience zone, every dealer (supermarket or not) bears some responsibility for CRV container redemption. In an unserved convenience zone, every dealer is obligated to redeem CRV containers at the register. Therefore, every dealer is incentivized in the creation of a certified recycling center or dealer cooperative within their zone.

- 4) *SB 1013: dealer cooperatives.* In 2022, the Legislature passed and the Governor signed SB 1013 (Atkins, Chapter 610, Statutes of 2022). Among other changes to the bottle bill, SB 1013 changes bottle redemption opportunities by establishing “dealer cooperatives” to service unserved zones. Dealer cooperatives allow beverage dealers to jointly form an organization to plan and arrange for the redemption of CRV containers across an unserved zone. This allows dealers to share responsibilities and costs of compliance while increasing customer access to CRV redemption in areas lacking certified recycling centers. Additionally, dealers could no longer pay a \$100 per day fee in lieu of providing redemption services.

Dealers must either provide redemption services individually or be part of a dealer cooperative by January 1, 2025. CalRecycle regulations for SB 1013 were finalized and became effective April 24, 2025. Presently, there is only one approved dealer cooperative, the Circular CRV Association, whose stewardship plan was approved by CalRecycle in 2025⁷. The Circular CRV Association represents one or more locations of several supermarket chains including Whole Foods, Ralph’s, Costco, Trader Joe’s, and Walmart, as per their final 2025 stewardship plan. Circular CRV operates across several convenience zones and agrees to accept all CRV containers redeemed within those convenience zones. Convenience zones without a dealer cooperative are either served by a certified recycling center or are “unserved,” requiring beverage dealers to redeem CRV containers at the register.

- 5) *Reverse vending machines in convenience zones.* A reverse vending machine (RVM) is an automated system in which a user can insert an eligible bottle and redeem the CRV. The machine identifies the CRV container (typically by scanning the barcode) to pay out the proper amount. The machine then cleans, sorts, and stores the containers. RVMs offer consumers an accessible and easy to use system to redeem CRV containers for an immediate payout. In contrast, other recycling centers have more limited operating or are further away. However, RVMs also have disadvantages: the machines can only accept one bottle at a time, may be limited in the material or size of container accepted, and have a smaller capacity than other recycling centers. Once an RVM is full,

⁷ CalRecycle (2025) *Approved Stewardship Plans*, <https://calrecycle.ca.gov/bevcontainer/dealercooperatives/plans/>

it cannot accept more containers until it is emptied. RVMs vary in size but typically accept between 200 and 600 containers, with some accepting more than one thousand.^{8,9} In contrast, recycling centers can take up to 200 containers or 1,200 pounds of containers per person per day; there is effectively no limit on what a certified recycling center can accept per day.¹⁰

RVMs have different requirements for hours of operation than traditional recycling centers. A certified recycling center must be open for 30 hours per week with between 30 and 50% of those hours occurring outside of 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday and sufficiently staffed to accept all beverage types (PRC § 14571 (a-e)). RVMs are exempted from the staffing requirement and are instead considered “open for business” as long as the equipment is functioning (PRC § 14571 (f)).

Currently, reverse vending machines alone cannot serve a convenience zone. However, reverse vending machines operated by a certified recycling center or dealer cooperative and with a host dealer (the beverage dealer collocated with the reverse vending machine) can serve a convenience zone. The host dealer has responsibilities such as maintaining the RVM, posting signage, and accepting some CRV containers at the register. An RVM which cannot accept large bottles or boxed wine pouches requires the host dealer to accept such items at the cash register (PRC § 14571 (i)). Host dealers must post a sign on the RVM that “states that beverage containers may be redeemed by the host dealer if the machine is nonoperational at any time during the required hours of operation” (PRC § 14571 (j)). However, enforcing the above requirements is burdensome on CalRecycle.

Due to the limited capacity of RVMs and limited capacity for enforcement, a full or broken RVM without sufficient signage may leave customers without the ability to redeem containers within a “served” convenience zone.

Comments

- 1) *Purpose of Bill.* According to the author, “California’s Beverage Container Recycling Program, originally enacted in 1984, significantly reduced litter and dramatically improved recycling rates. It did this by establishing a California Redemption Value (CRV) paid on beverage containers when purchased that could be collected when the containers were returned. However, outdated

⁸ Fortune Business Insights (2026) *Reverse Vending Machine (RVM) Market Size, Share, and Industry Analysis*, <https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/reverse-vending-machine-market-113029>

⁹ Recyclever, *RVM5-1200 Reverse Vending Machine*, <https://www.recyclever.com/blog/articles-10/rvm5-1200-reverse-vending-machine-323>

¹⁰ CalRecycle (2023) *Beverage Container Recycling Program Fact Sheet*, <https://www2.calrecycle.ca.gov/BevContainer/RecyclingCenters/>

definitions and limited infrastructure have created recycling “dead zones” in some parts of the state where consumers have few or no practical redemption options, thereby undercutting the state’s recycling efforts.

“Under current law, some high-volume beverage retailers are not required to participate due to antiquated grocery store definitions, and a single reverse vending machine can qualify as “serving” an area even when its limited capacity cannot accommodate the volume of containers sold in that area.

“SB 955 builds on reforms enacted in SB 1013 (Atkins, 2021) by requiring all high-volume beverage retailers to participate in the program and mandating that collection facilities within each community have sufficient capacity to collect all bottles and cans sold there.”

- 2) *A Supermarket by any other name.* SB 955 aims to shift the responsibility of CRV redemption from small, full line grocers to large beverage dealers which may not be considered a supermarket under existing statute. Under existing law, some beverage dealers aren’t supermarkets and therefore are not contributing to the bottle bill by anchoring a convenience zone, despite acting as a grocery store for an area. Often, these beverage dealers sell a *partial* line of groceries (such as a limited selection of fruits and vegetables) and a large volume of CRV containers. In such cases, a smaller grocer with a full line of groceries could bear more responsibility for CRV redemption in a convenience zone than a megastore with a partial line of groceries.

SB 955 tries to address this issue by updating the definition of a “supermarket,” which was last updated in the 1980s. Specifically, the bill states that the definition of “supermarket” includes retailers “regardless of whether the retail store operates a bakery or deli.” On paper, this would seem to expand the number of supermarkets to include retailers that were previously excluded (those with millions in gross sales but without a bakery or deli). However, neither the statute (PRC § 14526), the regulation (14 CCR § 2000, 14 CCR § 18982) nor the Progressive Grocer’s Guide states that a supermarket must have a bakery or deli. While this definition may add clarity onto what is and is not a supermarket, it is unclear whether the new definition truly expands the number of supermarkets beyond the status quo.

Additionally, large volume beverage dealers who are not supermarkets still bear some responsibility under existing law. All beverage dealers must redeem containers at the register (if they are in an unserved convenience zone) or join a dealer cooperative (which serves the convenience zone). However, beverage dealers *outside* of a convenience zone do not have the same responsibilities.

Large volume beverage dealers with a partial line of groceries which are not in convenience zones cannot anchor a new convenience zone nor can they contribute to the bottle bill through the convenience zone of a nearby supermarket. These beverage dealers could have millions in sales of CRV containers without increasing redemption opportunities for customers. Importantly, any change to statute which decreases the number of convenience zones could exacerbate this problem.

SB 955 increases the gross annual sales threshold for a supermarket from \$2 million to \$5 million, to adjust for inflation and to shift the burden of CRV redemption from small, full line grocers. While increasing the gross sales to \$5 million could decrease the number of eligible supermarkets, it is still less than if the value had been adjusted for inflation (which would be upward of \$8 million according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator between 1980 and 2026). Additionally, the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) estimates that in 2019, food stores sold on average \$6.2 million.¹¹ The 2025 sales are possibly higher due to inflation. It is unclear to what extent raising the gross sales from \$2 million to \$5 million will impact the number of “supermarkets.” However, this definition necessarily decreases the number of supermarkets, therefore decreasing the number of convenience zones. This could exacerbate the problem of large beverage dealers without a full line of groceries which are outside of convenience zones.

Finally, the bill removes the Progressive Grocer’s Guide from the supermarket definition. The Progressive Grocer’s Guide is a proprietary document, leaving Californians in the dark on CalRecycle’s definition of a supermarket. Removing the guide from the definition may increase clarity and transparency. However, the Progressive Grocer’s Guide remains a useful tool for agencies such as CalRecycle to identify supermarkets, with data on gross annual sales and lines of groceries sold. *The author may consider working further with CalRecycle to identify a definition of supermarket which increases transparency, maintains a sufficient number of convenience zones, and allows the use of tools such as the Progressive Grocer’s Guide where appropriate.*

- 3) *Conflicting handling fee provisions require clarification.* Under existing law, recycling centers and dealer cooperatives which serve a previously unserved zone are eligible for handling fees from CalRecycle. This is meant to incentivize serving convenience zones that would otherwise be unprofitable to operate within. If a second, certified recycling center begins operating in a convenience zone, neither center is eligible for handling fees (PRC § 14585).

¹¹ USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) (2025) *Retail Food Sales and Sales Growth*, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-markets-prices/retailing-wholesaling/retail-trends>

Under Section 14571.6(a)(1) of SB 955, RVMs would not be eligible to serve a convenience zone, and by extension would be ineligible for handling fees.

SB 955 allows a beverage dealer to operate an RVM for their own redemption purposes without precluding a recycling center or dealer cooperative from serving a convenience zone and receiving handling fees. Potentially, this could increase the number of certified recycling centers or dealer cooperatives serving convenience zones, rather than zones served by an RVM at a host dealer. Importantly, Section 14571.6 (a)(4) of SB 955 stipulates that an RVM in a convenience zone shall not make an existing certified recycling center ineligible for handling fees. While this is redundant, since RVMs already cannot be certified recycling centers under SB 955, this bill language may provide additional clarity.

However, part of the bill in print is at odds with the above provisions. Section 14571.6 (a)(5) of SB 955 states, in part, that an RVM *is* eligible for handling fees (pursuant to PRC § 14585). This contradicts the provision described above that makes RVMs unable to receive handling fees. The bill language is similarly unclear in subdivision (b) of Section 14571.6 which states “a reverse vending machine that is certified as a recycling center remains subject to all laws and regulations applicable to recycling centers” when, once again, SB 955 precludes RVMs from being certified as recycling centers. This seems to be an issue resulting from previous versions of the bill’s language conflicting with newer provisions. The author’s stated intent is that RVMs would not receive handling fees, thus reserving that incentive exclusively for recycling centers and dealer cooperatives. ***The committee may wish to consider striking Sections 14571.6 (a)(4) to clarify the author’s intent.***

- 4) *Committee amendments. Staff recommends the committee adopt the amendments bolded in comment 3 above.*

Related/Prior Legislation

SB 1341 (Cabaldon, 2026) allows CalRecycle to reduce the processing fee (paid by a beverage manufacturer for a CRV beverage container) if the processing fee is larger than the processing payment (paid from CalRecycle to processor and recycling centers) by an unspecified amount. This bill has been referred to this committee.

AB 2381 (Choi, 2020) required supplemental handling fees of \$0.0015 to \$0.002 to recycling centers and suspend the use of surveys and calculations of recycling costs to calculate processing payments. This bill died in committee.

SB 402 (Wolk, 2009) made many changes to the bottle bill including setting goals and creating incentives to reduce the number of unserved convenience zones. This bill was vetoed.

SOURCE: Circular-crv Association

SUPPORT:

A Voice for Choice Advocacy
California Grocers Association
Circular-crv Association
Glass Packaging Institute
Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC)
Tomra North America, INC.

OPPOSITION:

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