

New data shows how European countries can cut 75% of drinks container waste and meet EU plastic targets

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- *Wastage of 31 billion bottles and cans, including 22 billion plastic bottles, could be avoided in the EU through the adoption of deposit return systems, allowing countries to meet Single-Use Plastics Directive targets*
- *The market for refillables has plummeted over the past 20 years, but countries with deposits and high refill rates perform best in the world for wastage*
- *When Lithuania adopted deposit return, they eliminated more than 87% of this kind of drink container wastage by the first full year the system was up and running*

Over 41 billion plastic bottles, glass bottles and metal cans are littered in towns, cities and nature, ending up in rivers and oceans or in landfills or incinerators each year across 24 EU countries,¹ creating enough waste to cover 400 times the area of Brussels' Grand Place with a layer of bottles and cans 10 metres deep. This is according to new data in [What We Waste](#), a report released by non-profit research organisation, Reloop, and supported by Break Free From Plastic and the Changing Markets Foundation.

The data also reveals a clear way forward for policymakers, as for the first time it gives a comprehensive understanding of the impact of deposit return systems on drinks container wastage. Deposit return systems – set up for either recycling or refill or both – rely on consumers paying a small deposit which is refunded in full when the can or bottle is returned and are one of the most effective systems for reducing plastic pollution. 31 billion fewer drinks containers would be wasted if all EU countries adopted a deposit return system like those already operating in eight member states - including Germany, Finland and Lithuania - this move would cut total wastage of bottles and cans by 75%.

For the 315 million people living in countries without deposit systems, per capita wastage of drinks containers is 126 per year, but for those with access to a deposit system (129.4 million) it is just 16. Overall, across the 24 European countries we have data for, 39.5 billion containers are wasted across non-deposit countries and just 2 billion across those that use deposit return, or eight times less.

Under the EU's Single-Use Plastics Directive, member states have until 2029 to collect 90%+ of all plastic bottles put on the market. The data shows that, if all 24 EU countries in the report adopted a deposit return system, each year the EU would waste 22 billion fewer PET bottles. Moving quickly to adopt deposit return would significantly reduce the amount of plastic littered,

¹ 24 member states representing 99.5% of the EU population, excluding Malta, Cyprus and Luxembourg. EFTA members Iceland and Norway also use deposits.

landfilled or incinerated, and create clean streams of mechanically recyclable material.² This in turn will enable member states to more easily achieve a further Single-Use Plastics Directive target - to reach 30% mandatory recycled content in plastic bottles by 2030.

Nuša Urbančič, Campaigns Director at the **Changing Markets Foundation** said:

“Companies like Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have flooded the market with single-use plastic bottles and cans and for decades blocked proven solutions like deposit return systems. This data shows the stark price of these tactics - each week that the introduction of deposit systems across Europe is delayed means another 780 million bottles and cans choking the planet with trash. Policy-makers should stand their ground against the industry lobbying and adopt solutions to the pollution crisis without delay.”

The study presents a clear way forward for policymakers by showing the rapid positive effect of deposit return legislation and implementation. For example, in 2015, before Lithuania introduced deposit return, 113 drinks containers were wasted per capita, amounting to almost ten a month. In 2017, the first full year of the system being in operation, wastage had fallen sharply to just 14, barely one a month. If neighbouring Poland, which currently wastes 141 containers per capita, were to adopt such a system, per capita wastage would drop to 34, saving over 4 billion bottles and cans per year. In Spain, one of the highest for wastage of containers, transitioning to a deposit system would mean 128 fewer bottles and cans wasted per person.

Country	Current wasted containers per capita	Containers wasted per capita with Deposit Return Rates	Containers wasted per year without DRS
Portugal	176	32	1,805,470,942
Spain	168	40	7,923,532,047
Bulgaria	142	23	991,238,496
Poland	141	34	5,538,058,169

² Mechanical recycling refers to the collection, sorting, shredding and reprocessing of recyclable plastic as distinct from other processes such as chemical recycling.

France	122	30	8,206,632,516
Czechia	93	22	996,021,488
Austria	71	32	631,561,616

The report also draws on 20 years of data to show how the European market share of refillables - such as beer, soda and water bottles - has plummeted from 47% to 21% in just twenty years, while over the same period single-use containers have risen by over 200%. However, those countries with deposit return systems in place as well as a 25%+ refillable market share performed best of all, wasting 7 times fewer bottles and cans than those without either attribute. Of these countries, Germany stands out as best in class, with a refillable share of 55% and wasting just 10 containers per person per year.

Delphine Lévi Alvarès, European Coordinator of **Break Free From Plastic** said:

“The evidence can’t be ignored any longer - we are calling on governments and businesses to take meaningful action to drastically cut waste by supporting the vital combination of deposit return systems and reuse & refill quotas. This is a huge opportunity for countries to not only drastically cut the amount of wasted containers being burnt, landfilled or ending up in the environment, but also to hit EU legal targets well ahead of time.”

Reducing wastage also reduces emissions, a key factor as countries also prepare to fulfill the climate commitments of the Paris agreement. Refilling a glass bottle a second time cuts climate impact by 40%,³ and industry estimates that recycling an aluminum can is 92% more efficient than using virgin materials.⁴

Clarissa Morawski, CEO of **Reloop**, said:

“Reloop’s work in Brussels on the Single Use Plastics Directive was focused on ensuring the EU introduced smart policy on waste and resources. As our new analysis has shown, it is critical for regional and national policies to create the market conditions for solutions that really work. It’s only with deposit return systems for single-use, ideally alongside a strong refillable market, that we will see a dramatic reduction in the shocking wastage figures this report has uncovered and

³ https://zerowasteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/zwe_reloop_report_reusable-vs-single-use-packaging-a-review-of-environmental-impact_en.pdf.pdf_v2.pdf

⁴ <https://www.aluminum.org/sustainability/aluminum-recycling>

ensure that the greatest number of high quality materials are captured for re-use and closed loop recycling.”

Previous studies have also shown that deposit systems can create between 11 and 38-times more jobs than other waste management options.⁵ In addition they can save significant resources for local governments and tax-payers on litter clean-up. For example, recent calculations show that it costs Spanish taxpayers up to 744 million EUR per year on litter clean-ups – a figure that could be significantly reduced with the introduction of a deposit return system.⁶

Henriette Schneider, Project Manager at **Deutsche Umwelthilfe** said:

“The EU and national governments need to undertake concerted efforts to increase the market share of refillables, by setting ambitious targets and providing financial incentives. Austria is leading the way and will invest 110 million in take-back and refill infrastructure, and Germany’s world-leading return and refill system for beverage containers shows the impact this can have on wastage figures. Refillables rely on the same take-back infrastructure as deposit return systems and can easily be scaled up. Furthermore, they reduce waste at source and play a key role in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.”

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The full report is available on request.

About Changing Markets | www.changingmarkets.org | @ChangingMarkets

The Changing Markets Foundation was formed to accelerate and scale up solutions to sustainability challenges by leveraging the power of markets. Working in partnership with NGOs, other foundations and research organisations we are keen to explore effective solutions to the plastic pollution crisis.

About Break Free From Plastic | www.breakfreefromplastic.org/ | @brkfreefromplastic

⁵ Reloop (n.d.) Fact sheet: Deposit return systems create more jobs [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.reloop-platform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DRS-Fact-sheet-Jobs-27Jan2021.pdf>

⁶ <http://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Spain-Litter-Costs-Eunomia-Final.pdf>

The #breakfreefromplastic Movement is a global movement envisioning a future free from plastic pollution. Since its launch in 2016, more than 11,000 organizations and individual supporters from across the world have joined the movement to demand massive reductions in single-use plastics and to push for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis. Break Free From Plastic runs the #WeChooseReuse campaign, calling for a global shift towards refillable and reusable products.

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ReLoop is an international non-profit organisation that brings together industry, government and NGOs into a broad network that seeks to bring about positive change at all levels of resource and waste policy.