

Committee: Environment and Transportation
Testimony on: HB 232 Maryland Beverage Container Recycling Refund and Litter Reduction Program
Position: Support
Hearing date: February 14, 2025

The Earth Ministry of River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Bethesda MD¹ strongly supports HB 232, commonly known as the bottle bill. It is designed to reduce pollution from plastic, glass and metal beverage containers and to boost recycling.

In Maryland, 5.9 billion beverage containers were sold in 2021, but only about a quarter were recycled. The remaining 4.4 billion went into landfills, incinerators or were littered.² During heavy rains, beverage bottles littered along our landscape and roadways wash into storm drains where they eventually reach streams, rivers, the Chesapeake Bay and even the Atlantic Ocean. These plastic bottles break into ever smaller pieces and are ingested by marine life, injuring and killing fish, seabirds and marine animals.³ These microplastics have also been found in our food, air and water, and in our blood, saliva, liver, kidneys and in placentas.⁴

Even when plastic bottles are placed in curbside recycling containers, they are often contaminated by other co-mingled trash. Contaminated bottles can't be recycled and are either incinerated, where they release toxic air pollution, or put into landfills, where they leach harmful chemicals. Because plastic is a "forever" chemical, plastic waste is an overriding concern of our Earth Ministry.

This is a good place to explain that one of the central tenets of our Unitarian Universalist faith is a call to "respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Because of the failure to control plastic waste, plastic now permeates and pollutes the environment that we, along with all life on Earth, depend on to sustain our lives. And the volume of plastic is growing.

About half a billion tons of plastic are produced globally each year, more than twice the amount two decades ago.⁵ "More plastic is being produced, and an even smaller percentage of it is being recycled. The crisis just keeps getting worse and worse, and without drastic change it will continue to worsen as the industry plans to triple plastic production by 2050."⁶

Of course, plastic is not inherently bad. "Disposable plastic syringes prevent the spread of disease. Contact lenses, hearing aids, artificial limbs, tubing to unblock veins and live-saving heart valves

¹ The Earth Ministry is a member-created committee established in accordance with the Congregation's bylaws. This testimony is submitted by and on behalf of the Earth Ministry. The Congregation has not taken a position on this bill.

² Container Recycling Institute estimate, based on 2021 data.

³ Sierra Club, Maryland Chapter. https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/beverage-container-recycling-refund-litter-reduction-coalition-fact-sheet_1-20-2025_0.pdf

⁴ HARVARD medicine magazine, Spring 2023, "Microplastics Everywhere."

⁵ Hiroko Tabuchi, "Saudi Arabia Leads Pushback Against Global Plastic Treaty," NY Times, Nov. 30, 2024.

⁶ Lisa Ramsden, Greenpeace USA on NPR's All Things Considered, Oct. 24, 2022.

are all composed of plastic.”⁷ But pollution from plastic bottles is different--it’s a global crisis. Yet there is a simple fix.

Bottle bills are a tried-and-true solution to address litter and improve recycling. “...Since the 1970s, these programs have proven to be the most effective post-consumer recycling systems ever created”.⁸ Currently, 10 states and more than 40 countries have enacted bottle bills. Globally, Australia, Europe and India have passed container deposit laws in recent years. In the US, however, no state has passed a bottle bill since 2017. The US congress considered a national bottle bill in 2021 and 2023. Those too, failed. Maryland has been trying to pass a bottle bill for nearly 20 years, since at least 2007, without success. In an editorial last November, The Baltimore Sun wrote, “It’s time for Maryland to get serious about imposing a deposit on plastic bottles.”⁹

Failed attempts to pass bottle bills come at a time when public concern about plastic pollution is soaring, especially among young people concerned about the environment. Citizens are asking for these programs. Numerous states and the District of Columbia have tried to pass a bottle bill.¹⁰ States with bottle bills can achieve recycling rates of up to 90% of their beverage bottles. In Maryland, by comparison, the estimated recycling rate is only 22%. So, what is preventing Maryland and other states from passing bottle bills?

“The old industry playbook has kept new Bottle Bills at bay in the US for decades,” the New England-based Conservation Law Foundation explains in its 2022 report, *The Big Beverage Playbook for Avoiding Responsibility*. It details how the industry delays, distracts and derails proposed bottle bills. And it notes that when these bills were beginning to gain momentum in the mid-1970s, the industry spent “a minimum of \$20 million a year” fighting bottle bills. It also notes that between 1991 and 2011, according to the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, the beverage industry “outspent proponents of Bottle Bills by as much as 30 to 1.”¹¹

Fast-forward to today. The trade group for plastic producers, National Association for PET Container Resources (NAPCOR), concerned by rising anti-plastic sentiment, has developed social media campaigns and an infomercial by actor Dennis Quaid to tout the virtues of single-use plastic.¹²

This fierce and long-standing opposition comes from those who created this environmental tragedy in the first place. Meanwhile, conservation groups such as Anacostia Waterkeepers, Anacostia Watershed Society, Alice Ferguson Foundation and private organizations such as Baltimore’s Waterfront Partnership have taken on the task of collecting plastic bottles and other litter from our communities and waterways. But they are facing an ever-increasing tide of beverage containers and other litter.

⁷ Danielle Smith-Llera, *You Are Eating Plastic Every Day*, North Mankato, MN, Compass Point Books, 2020, p. 50.

⁸ Kirstie L. Pecci, Peter W. Blair and Kevin P. Budris, *The Big Beverage Playbook for Avoiding Responsibility*, Feb. 2022, p. 3.

⁹ “If Maryland had a dime for every wasted plastic bottle,” Editorial, *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 23, 2024.

¹⁰ *Bottle Bills in the USA*, Jan. 18, 2025. <https://www.bottlebill.org/legislation/usa.htm>.

¹¹ Kirstie L. Pecci, Peter W. Blair and Kevin P. Budris, *The Big Beverage Playbook for Avoiding Responsibility*, Feb. 2022, p.11.

¹² Hiroko Tabuchi, “Inside the Plastic Industry’s Battle to Win Over Hearts and Minds.” *NY Times*, Nov. 27, 2024.

The sensible approach is to keep beverage containers out of the environment in the first place by enacting bottle bills. We join in support of Marylanders across the state in asking for a bottle bill this year and urge a favorable report on HB 232.

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