

RENEWED SUPPORT FOR DEPOSIT RETURN IN BELGIUM

Clarissa Morawski

Clarissa Morawski is the Managing Director and co-founder of Reloop – a new platform of like-minded interests that share a common vision for a circular economy. The founding members bring together industry, government, and non-governmental organizations to form a network for advances in policy that create enabling system conditions for circularity across the European economy.

www.reloopplatform.eu

Twitter: [@reloop_platform](https://twitter.com/reloop_platform)



Canadian-born, Ms. Morawski has over twenty years of technical, analytical and communications experience in waste minimization policy and operations. She is recognized world-wide for the comprehensive information she provides, and has also contributed nearly 100 articles and cover stories on waste minimization operations and policy for several Canadian and US publications since 1998. (www.cmconsultinginc.com). She just completed her fifth year teaching sustainable materials management at Trent University in Peterborough, Canada.

Post-consumption, where the real smash-up begins

Officials are taking a closer look at a solution for increasing the quantity and quality of reuse and recycling in Belgium. In August 2014, Walloon's Minister for Environment, Spatial Planning, Mobility and Transport, Airports and Animal Welfare, Carlo Di Antonio, acknowledged that Wallonia has a litter problem. To help clean up the mess, he has

proposed a modern deposit return program for one-way beverage packages, which he hopes to introduce within two years.

Di Antonio stated that the deposit return program would contribute to improving the state of the Walloon public space by reducing litter and it would also be an added value for the regional economy. Supporters also cited a study conducted in 2010 by Friends of the Earth Europe which demonstrated that a tonne of recycled waste generates 5 to 10 times more jobs than a tonne of waste incinerated.

Not long after, Flemish Minister for the Environment Joke Schauvliege also came to the same conclusion. In Flanders, the current coalition agreement states that "Flanders is among the European top regarding waste management - and we want to keep it this way by enrolling us in an innovative circular economy."

The coalition suggested an impact analysis on the introduction of a deposit program on (plastic) bottles and cans. So, during the first part of 2015, an impact analysis was prepared by CE DELFT together with a Belgium consultancy. While not public yet, some preliminary findings were leaked and reported to the media. It showed that for Flanders alone, a deposit return program could result in a reduction of 5,600 tonnes of roadside litter annually, which makes up about 40% of all litter. It also reported that by incentivizing consumers to return empty cans to the store, Flanders could save approximately 16 million on cleanup costs.

Some businesses interests however are fighting hard to kill any such initiative. The Belgian industry trade association for water and soft drinks (FIEB) suggests that a deposit system is not the solution to the problem of litter. David Marquenie, secretary general of the FIEB admits "Litter is a problem, nevertheless a deposit system is not the solution."

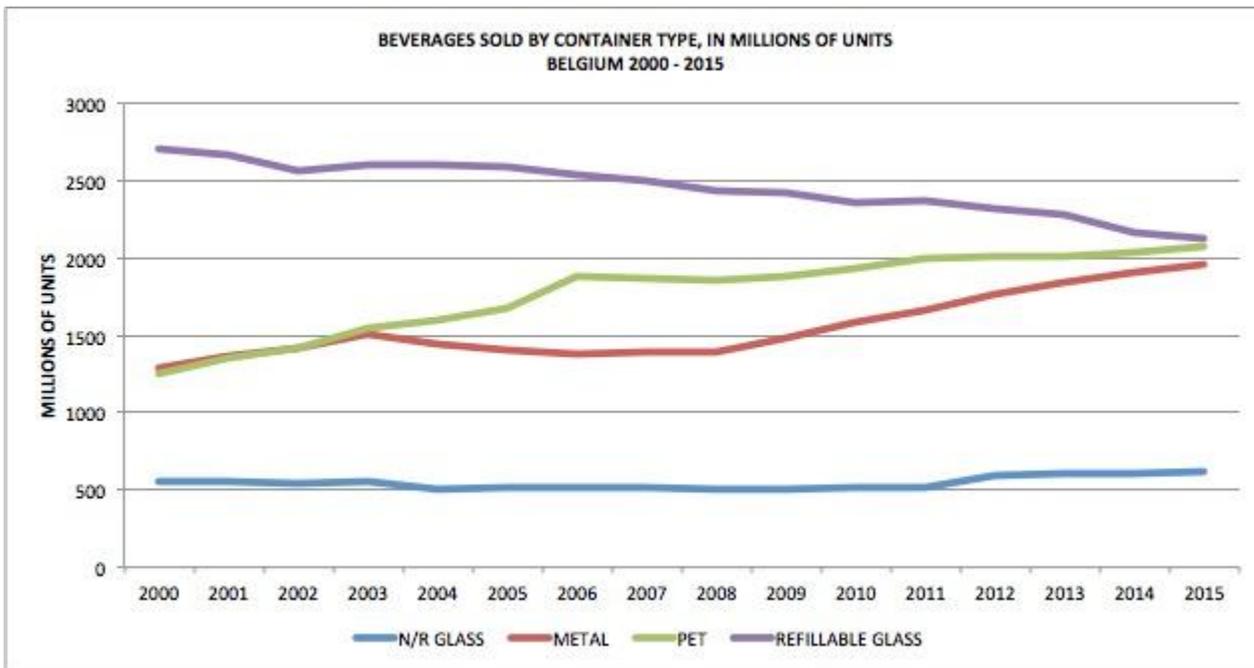
But contrary to Marquenie's comments, deposit return systems consistently demonstrate throughout the world that litter reduction is immediate and highly effective because of the value of the deposit. When bottles and cans are worth money, they do not end-up as litter, rather they are returned for refill or recycling.

FIEB also stressed that the sorting system is already very efficient in Belgium. "In Belgium, 98% of cans are already recycled, more than in Germany". However a closer look at the numbers reveals something very different. According the FostPlus annual report (2013), of this 98%, only 55% of metal cans were actually recycled, with the remaining 45% recovered from waste incinerators and ash ripening centres – a practice which does not exactly mean

recycling in the traditional sense. Rather, it means using a dirty mix of different metals found at the bottom of a waste incinerator to be put into low-value applications – but certainly not recycled back into new cans, which for aluminum can save 95% of the energy required in manufacturing.

In an effort to understand what such a system can look like, a field trip was organized for various stakeholders, including the consultants working on the study; staff from OVAM (Public Waste Agency Flanders), FostPlus, and the retail association. The group travelled to Germany to see a modern deposit return system in action. They visited small retailers like a gas station as well as medium and large size grocers – all of which have adapted to taking back containers in their stores, either manually or through reverse vending machines.

But perhaps most important issue is the potential such a system has to reverse the declining refillable bottle share in the Belgium beverage market (see figure below). The figure shows refillable beverage sales in millions of units in purple. The downward trend from 2000 to 2015 illustrates how one-way containers (metal and plastic) are taking over the refillables share of container sales.



Refillable containers are significantly less harmful to the environment because they are used over and over again. Countless studies agree that refillable bottles use less energy, create less waste, reduce emissions and provide more jobs. A deposit return program for Belgium would provide the Belgium beverage industry with a level playing field in terms of upfront deposits paid by consumers as well as a system with retailers where returned containers (refillable or non-refillable) would be taken back to where they were purchased.

Environmentally preferable refillable glass, plastic and metal containers are recognized as part of a circular economy and deposit return can do a lot to help increase their share of the market.

Once the feasibility study is published later this spring, Di Antonio will meet with Brussels and Flanders counterparts to discuss next steps for a national program.