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To: wastecomments
Subject: Return scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans

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The Programme for Government included the commitment to establish a deposit-and-return scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans. Such schemes are in operation in various countries, for example, California had a cash return scheme on aluminium cans which was in operation 20+ years ago, with people able to bring their empty cans back to shops selling the type of product, e.g. soft drink, and get 10cent back. This return scheme, and the amount to be returned when the can was brought back to shop, was written on the can. Many years ago a similar type of return system operated in Ireland when soft drinks were produced by relatively local companies and sold in glass bottles and the bottles indicated 2d, in pre-decimal currency, would be payable when the bottle was returned.

These type of schemes depend on retailers being brought into the schemes. Of course such schemes have advantages in that there is a built-in incentive for users of containers to bring them back to the retailer but there is also the cost, particularly in time, for retailers in co-operating with such schemes even where they could be automated with a machine taking back the cans, dependent on having a standardised size of can, and issuing the refund in cash through the machine.

I am certainly not negative about the environmental benefits of a return scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans nor about the advantages of return scheme for glass bottles however I would question the benefits, when costs, times and financial, of setting up and maintaining such schemes are taken into account. Why should people need a "bribe" to make sure their used containers do not end up as litter?

Currently we have collections of plastic bottles and aluminium cans available as part of the household collection for recyclables. Of course more could be done in non household situations but schools/workplaces, places of entertainment, sports stadia and transport termini are making the effort to provide the type of segregated bins into which people, using their premises, can dispose of their bottles and cans. Provision of this type of infrastructure at other venues has to be encouraged as has been done in recent years when festivals and other large gatherings began to factor in minimising environmental impact.

If people were much more aware of the environmental damage caused by bauxite mining to produce aluminium cans and the human rights issues in, for example Guinea, which have resulted from the activities of mining companies, then that would incentivize people to do what they can to ensure that demand for the raw materials to make new aluminium was reduced through the reuse of existing aluminium, i.e. recycling of aluminium cans. Collecting the cans through the household recyclables collection and collection of the bins provided in education/workplace and entertainment venues would not need investment in time and facilities/work in retail that would be needed by a deposit and return scheme but would be a way of greatly reducing litter and the environmental pollution caused by cans.

It is relatively easy to show the benefits of recycling aluminium cans to reduce extraction of raw materials in bauxite mining. The plastic situation is more complex due to various polymers used in different plastics. However for PET, as used in drinks bottles, the process of recycling to produce new materials is well developed and "old" PET bottles can now be used as part of the content of new drinks bottles as well as the well established use of PET from recycled bottles in the production of clothing such as fleeces. Of course we have to do a lot more to discourage the use of single use plastic so that there is less plastic to be

"disposed" of through recycling and research into more environmental ways of returning the components of common plastics to their original individual chemicals which could then be reused in plastic production or otherwise.

There is a long tradition of recycling glass, greater encouragement, through the realisation of the importance of reuse in avoiding need for more raw materials, should be emphasised. People in urban areas have access to bottle banks, all glass bottles should be voluntarily put into such banks and not put into general rubbish or left as litter.

Ireland is a very small country, do we really need to set up the infrastructure needed, e.g. machines to take back cans or the time needed to do so manually, when greater emphasis on placing aluminium cans and plastic bottles for recycling as part of household/workplace bin collection and greater use of bottle banks for glass bottles could reduce the presence of litter, and its environmental damage, at less cost?