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Future of bottle deposit up in air

1 bill would kill it; 1 would extend it

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Albany Bureau

ALBANY -- Don't know what to do with your empty water bottles? There's no agreement at the state Capitol, either.

Environmental groups and grocery stores dueled Wednesday over whether to expand New York's bottle-deposit law or scrap it altogether. The outcome could change the way New Yorkers handle recyclable trash.

At issue are competing bills: One would broaden the current deposit law to require a 5-cent return on all beverages, including water and juice, instead of just carbonated drinks. The bill would also allow the state to reclaim the estimated \$85 million a year from unredeemed bottles, which would be allocated to the Environmental Protection Fund. The other bill would end the 5-cent deposit and replace it with a broad-based tax on most packaging, from cereal and baby food to soda cans.

Both measures are stuck in committee in the Assembly and Senate. While grocers, food industry executives and some legislators are promoting the bill ending bottle deposits as a more extensive, effective means of recycling, environmentalists call it a "stalling tactic," designed in big business' interest to block any bottle-law expansion. Further, they say it will reduce incentives to recycle; some call the packaging bill the "Heaps of Broken Glass Bill."

"A bottle without a deposit is more likely to end up in the trash," said Laura Haight of New York Public Interest Research Group. But proponents of the packaging bill contend that their proposal would provide an alternative way of recycling. It would tax manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers less than 0.03 percent on all products they sell in New York. It would generate a projected \$23 million annually and would go to expand municipal curbside recycling and create a fund to promote recycled products.

A trade group representing grocery stores and food workers strongly opposes expanding the bottle-

deposit law. The proposal takes "an ill-conceived, outdated idea and (makes) it worse," said Jim Rogers, president of the Food Industry Association of New York. Rogers said an expanded bottle law would trigger higher prices on juices and water. He called the bill "a tax on families."

But bottle-law advocates say the recycling bill would increase litter, not help get rid of it. "New York state's bottle bill has a 22-year track record of success," said Jenny Gitlitz of the Container Recycling Institute. Gitlitz said currently about 70-75 percent of bottles that carry deposits are returned to recycling centers. Gitlitz suggested the real motive behind the recycling bill is to make it easier for grocers. They are "in the business of food and drinks; (recycling) isn't their job," she said.

In fact, some stores struggle to keep bottle recycling areas clean, said Tom Coughlin, vice chairman of King Kullen, a grocery chain. That's part of why the law should be changed, he said. "We're becoming a garbage dump for the bottle law," Coughlin said. Gitlitz said she had never heard of a health violation being issued as a result of the bottle law.