



Operation Fuel Testimony in Support of Raised Bill 1037, [An Act Concerning Waste Management](#) known popularly as CT’s “Bottle Bill.”

Submitted by Gannon Long, Policy & Public Affairs Director. March 19, 2021.

To the honorable Co-Chairs, Sen. Cohen and Rep. Gresko; Ranking Members, Sen. Miner and Rep. Harding; and Vice Chairs, Senator Slap and Rep. Palm, and distinguished members of the Environment Committee:

Thank you for receiving Operation Fuel’s testimony. We support three bills on your agenda today, including Raised Bill 319 to ban PFAs, and Bill 930 to expand composting. We are grateful to our coalition partners, including Clean Water Action and Sierra Club, for leading efforts to pass this important legislation.

We are here primarily today to discuss and support Raised Bill 1037, [An Act Concerning Waste Management](#) - known popularly as CT’s “Bottle Bill.” Looking back to when our bottle deposit system was established in 1978, with minor updates in 2008, we are optimistic that 2021 is the year for this commonsense reform to our state’s recycling practices. Operation Fuel applauds the committee’s leadership on this issue and urges favorable passage this year.

Operation Fuel ensures equitable access to energy for all by providing year-round energy and utility assistance, promoting energy independence, and advocating for affordable energy.

Operation Fuel partners with local government and community-based organizations throughout Connecticut to ensure that families and individuals in need have access to year-round utility and water assistance. We were founded in the late 1970s as the nation’s first fuel bank, helping struggling families pay their heat and light bills. Today our programs have grown to include home systems repair and replacement, water bill assistance, and homelessness intervention – as energy insecurity is one of the leading causes of homelessness.

If you’re reading or hearing this testimony and know a household struggling with high utility or water bills, please find our online application at www.operationfuel.org/gethelp.

Operation Fuel is a lifeline for CT families, especially during the pandemic. In addition to providing emergency assistance to households that fall behind on their bills, we engage in longer term policy and planning, addressing the energy affordability gap on many fronts. Operation Fuel is a diverse organization with multiple stakeholders; we sit at a variety of tables. Our audiences include those looking to both give and get help to CT families struggling to pay heat, light, and water bills. Operation Fuel’s Executive

Director, Brenda Watson, MA, co-chairs Connecticut's Low Income Energy Advisory Board, which develops our state's annual LIHEAP plan. In this group, we partner with state agencies such as Depts of Social Services, Energy & Environmental Protection, Offices of Policy & Management & Consumer Counsel, in addition to service providers and advocates such as Community Action Agencies and fuel banks, and representatives from the utility companies.

We are grateful to our partners in the Renews coalition, including Acadia Center, CCAG, Citizens' Campaign for the Environment, Clean Water Action, League of Conservation Voters, Save the Sound, Sierra Club, Sunrise, and many others across our state advocating for environmental justice. Executive Director Watson served alongside environmental advocates as a member of the Governor's Council on Climate Change (GC3), appointed by Gov. Lamont in 2019.

All in all, **Operation Fuel sits at a lot of different tables, representing and interacting with many groups of people, and serving clients across Connecticut. We are here today to support the bottle bill because it brings together solutions for multiple challenges at once. The bottle bill has broad support in the legislature because it addresses environmental, consumer, and economic equity concerns in our state.** Like our friend Speaker Ritter told the League of Conservation Voters summit this January, we believe this is the year for the bottle bill. We urge you to support favorable passage.

First, let's highlight a few key sections of the bill. We support the additions in Lines 5-6, 10-13, and 20-21, adding several products to the deposit system that will expand bottle returns and increase our state's efficiency in waste management. We recommend that you remove Line 38, which would exclude 50 ML bottles known as "nips" from the bill. These small bottles, sold at low prices and disproportionately in low-income communities, are among the most likely containers to become litter on city streets. Providing a return would incentivize local bottle collectors to remove them from neighborhood streets and parks, a valuable public service to every municipality. In general, we applaud the effort to make deposit returns categories as broad as possible.

Lines 77-78 doubles the amount the person returning a bottle receives from five to ten cents. We believe this increase is long overdue. Increasing the deposit fee to ten cents provides a greater incentive for collectors to pick up litter, reduce glass in the waste stream, and improve our recycling integrity. Additionally, as noted in Lines 180-182, it is necessary to increase the distributor fee from one to three cents. This enhances the financial sustainability of the program and facilitates the expansion and improvement of return centers. We note that the deposit return has been stuck at five cents for the past 40 years. In 1981, the minimum wage was \$3.35; CT's population was roughly 10% smaller. We produce more waste today as a state than we did 40 years ago, as pollution has increased. Today, we require increasingly innovative solutions to address these challenge – the bottle bill is an important step in that direction.

Regarding Lines 292-99, directing 80% unclaimed deposits to the General Fund – let's not do that. Increasing the deposit fees is necessary, but instead of just plugging holes in the overall budget – which is unnecessary this year for a variety of reasons, including our state's flush rainy day fund, high bond rating, and federal stimulus funds – we should spend them to address our systemic environmental justice issues. Last month, [Governor Lamont has publicly committed to spending at least 35% of Cap and Invest revenue on equity](#). The bottle bill is a major reform in our recycling system, and it should be designed to invest further in environmental justice and sustainability. Please edit bill language so that at least 35% of unclaimed deposit revenues go toward vulnerable communities in our state, matching the governor's commitment.

At a CT DEEP sponsored webinar series in July 2020, GC3 member Dr. Mark Mitchell of the CT Coalition for Environmental Justice presented data showing a direct correlation between population density of black and brown people, and the likelihood of environmental hazards sited in that community. Operation Fuel's offices are located in an Environmental Justice Community, a short 1-2 mile distance from the MIRA trash burning plant, where almost a third of CT's towns send their waste. Just a few miles north of our offices is a landfill that only completed the capping process in 2015, after spewing toxins into the adjacent neighborhoods for decades. **When we talk about environmental injustices that have placed the greatest burdens of climate change and pollution on the most vulnerable and least responsible members of our society, we are speaking from personal and policy knowledge.** As we increasingly hear and read encouraging language from the governor, commissioners, and legislature about equity and addressing systemic racism in our state, the bottle bill before you today is more than words – it is an opportunity to take action. Our climate crisis, like our poverty crisis, is happening now. We simply do not have more time to waste.

Connecticut's mid 1990s transition to single stream recycling defunded consumer education and complicated our waste management processing. Much of our state's current single stream recycling is contaminated, and thus ends up in landfills - despite consumers' best intentions. Due to the poor integrity of recycled products, the markets purchasing them have dried up; what was once a revenue enhancer for our state's municipalities is now a huge financial strain. According to the Waterbury Department of Public Works in 2019, selling recyclable materials generated over \$10,000 in 2015; today, tipping fees cost the city over \$400,000. **When the trash burning plant in South Hartford is shut down next year – as the governor and DEEP commissioner have indicated that it will be – municipalities will be strapped even further to pay for trash removal. The more towns and cities throw away, the more scarce their resources become.** Over time, reducing how much waste enters landfills and trash burning plants, or is driven out of state, is the financially and environmentally sustainable approach to remediate this impending crisis - the 2021 bottle bill leads us that way.

Operation Fuel primarily serves clients who earn between 60-75% of CT's median income, which according to the United Way is up to about \$47,000 for an individual in 2021. Last year we provided energy assistance to over 6,000 households and 14,000

individuals in our state, serving as a particularly important lifeline for Low- and Moderate-Income (LMI) communities in CT. While CT has long been a prosperous state, wealth inequality has increased dramatically over the past 40 years. Members of this committee probably know that there are people across this state who collect returnable bottles and cans, removing these items from their path to our landfills, largely motivated by the relatively negligible financial reward. Doubling this return fee would directly benefit some of the most economically vulnerable residents in our state, who are providing an essential service by streamlining our recycling and eliminating litter. Those of you who have recently taken a walk around the Capitol, or maybe your own neighborhood, have likely noticed that returnable bottles almost never become litter on our streets. The bottle deposit return system is a highly efficient mechanism to get recyclable materials out of our waste stream and off our streets – by providing financial incentive for some of the hardest working and economically vulnerable members of our society.

For decades, CT's leaders have chosen to manage waste through policies that create astronomical asthma rates and shorter life expectancies for Black and brown people in CT. These policies maintain pristine landscapes and expensive property values for some residents, while forcing others to live in neighborhoods where garbage fumes fill the air. Will we continue funding inequitable, dangerous plans that imperil the most marginalized communities for years into the future? Or will we address what we acknowledge to be historic injustices, and change course?

Operation Fuel appreciates the hard work of this committee's leadership and members to reform our harmful and out of date waste management practices. We urge you to consider the triple bottom line – people, planet, finances – that the bottle bill generates. This is bill a win-win – let's get it done.

Thank you.