



## 4.6. France: A missed opportunity

The situation in France shines a spotlight on a missed opportunity for the introduction of effective deposit return legislation in the country, which will be needed to meet the SUP Directive's 90% separate-collection target for beverage bottles.

According to data from Ecological Transition Agency (ADEME), which is responsible for waste-prevention and -management policy, France produced 4.6 tonnes of waste per capita in 2016. Of that waste, 65% was recycled, 29% ended up in landfills and 6% was incinerated, the latter showing an increase of 59% over the previous 10 years.<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, France generated 2.32 million tonnes of plastic-packaging waste, of which only 27% was recycled.<sup>2</sup> According to Suez, each French person consumes an average of 96 plastic bottles per year. Only 57% of those plastic bottles are currently recycled;<sup>3</sup> 43% end up in landfills, incinerated or in the natural environment, demonstrating significant room for improvement.<sup>4</sup>

### 4.6.1. The Anti-Waste Law

The Anti-Waste Law for a Circular Economy, released in January 2020, was the outcome of a wide-ranging consultation initiated in October 2017.<sup>5</sup> The law introduced 50 measures, including a ban on all single-use plastics by 2040.<sup>6</sup> The transition towards banning some single-use plastic products began back in 2015 with the French Energy Transition Law.<sup>7</sup> Under this new piece of legislation, however, the ban on single-use cups, plates and cotton buds was fully introduced on 1 January 2020, and was followed by a ban on straws, cutlery, stirrers and other problematic items by 2021. Described as an '*ambitious piece of legislation*'<sup>8</sup> and a '*world-first*'<sup>9</sup> by the French government, it also generated positive press because it banned the destruction of clothes, cosmetics, electrical items, hygiene products and other unsold goods.<sup>10</sup> Implementation of the targets for reduction, reuse and recycling (a ban on all single-use plastic packaging by 2040, all plastic to be recyclable by 2025, a 50% reduction in single-use plastic bottles by 2030, replacing disposable tableware in fast-food restaurants with reusable tableware by 2023, etc.) is being set under decrees, three of which are currently undergoing public consultation, which will be revised every five years.<sup>11,12,13</sup>

### 4.6.2. Development of a DRS

The new Anti-Waste Law has set a reuse target of 5% of packaging units put on the market by 2023, and 10% by 2027. However, crucially, this target was introduced without corresponding container-deposit legislation, which limits the ability to operate robust reuse systems at scale. DRS will only be introduced after discussions in mid-2023, when the selective collection schemes and voluntary systems can be shown to have failed in reaching the 90% plastic-bottle-collection target. Implementation is subject to a further study from ADEME, which needs to investigate whether EU targets can be reached in any other way, such as through waste sorting and kerbside collection.<sup>14</sup> This pushes mandatory collection at least five years into the future, makes reuse targets more difficult to hit and will produce several years' worth of preventable plastic pollution.

### 4.6.3. The municipalities and recyclers against DRS

Initially, the debate around DRS for PET bottles and cans was prompted by a report presented to the government by Collectif Boissons – an informal group within CITEO (a French EPR organisation) and an industry conglomerate composed of the beer, food-processing, soda, mineral and water producers and milk industries, as well as the National Beverage Federation and the supermarket associations.<sup>15</sup>

Among the most prominent members of the Collectif Boissons group were Coca-Cola, Nestlé and Danone. Notably, this DRS proposal – which included the amount of deposit, the type of packaging included and the economic balance of the system – was initially entirely proposed by EPR scheme organisations and the beverage and retailers industry. The plan – which did not include glass, and was presented as a *fait accompli* – faced strong opposition and scepticism from recyclers, can manufacturers,<sup>16</sup> NGOs and municipalities. This prompted a wider debate, and put the government under pressure to include a more diverse group of stakeholders in discussions.

The main opposition to DRS came from French municipalities and recyclers. While the Association of French Mayors declared support for reusable packaging in local distribution networks, it firmly opposed a deposit system, calling it '*an attempt to privatise the collection of plastic in favour of producers*', which would supposedly destabilise public services.<sup>17</sup> The municipalities claimed they would experience a drop in revenue for local authorities, and that such a system could unfairly favour large-scale distribution, where collection machines would be installed.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, municipalities were further pushed against DRS due to a study commissioned by the Senate, which estimated that local authorities would suffer at least €240 million in net financial losses annually from the implementation of a deposit on PET bottles and cans.<sup>19,20</sup> This contradicted the study by the governments' pilot committee – chaired by Jacques Vernier and launched in June 2018 by the Secretary of State for Ecological Transition – whose mandate was developing the conditions for the implementation of DRS in France.<sup>21</sup> Vernier's study disputed the numbers in the Senate report and claimed the real cost to municipalities would only be €12 million, as municipalities only pay 20% of collection costs.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the resistance to the Anti-Waste Law from large supermarkets – such as Casino, Auchan, Monoprix and Carrefour – focused on the targets proposed towards food-waste reduction and the prohibition of plastic packaging around fruit and vegetables. However, the most aggressive opposition to the introduction of deposit came from recycling and waste-management specialists, who launched an aggressive campaign against DRS.

Recycling companies (such as Paprec and Federec) and the Association of French Mayors criticised the idea of a DRS due to their investment in sorting centres to manage all household plastic-packaging waste, sorted at source across France, by 2022. Until 2014, French citizens were required to sort all types of packaging and all types of materials – except plastics. For plastics, the exception ruled that citizens were only required to sort plastic bottles and jars. However, after a CITEO study, other types of single-use plastics were included in the scheme, implemented in 2016, which mandated all plastics to be sorted in the 'yellow bin'. Yet, to make this expansion viable, sorting centres had to make certain investments to upgrade the system.<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Petithugenin, CEO of Paprec, claimed that local authorities and recycling companies had invested €2 billion.<sup>24</sup> Their opposition to DRS was based on the fact that some of the investment made would become redundant, as the amount of material collected through kerbside collection would decrease. The municipalities' associations were very active in trying to unite all stakeholders (including recyclers), and joined forces to support the stance against mandatory DRS, arguing that it would reduce revenue but not kerbside collection costs.<sup>25</sup>

In the campaign against DRS, Paprec even released a statement claiming '*not a single French plastic bottle ended up in the oceans*' and blaming the problem of marine plastic pollution on countries without proper waste-management systems. It also stated that France has one of the most advanced waste-management systems in the world, with 98% of water bottles collected<sup>26</sup> – a false number used to downplay the need for mandatory measures.



Veolia – another big player in waste management – held a favourable position on DRS, and only became more vocal towards the end of national discussions.<sup>27</sup> Even though Veolia referred to the system as '*complementary to the already existing selective sorting approach*',<sup>28</sup> its silence up to that point meant the opportunity for ambitious legislation was lost.

4.6.4. A missed opportunity


Three public opinion polls conducted in March,<sup>a</sup> September<sup>b</sup> and November<sup>c</sup> 2019 showed support for DRS stood at 89%, 90% and 84% respectively. Although NGOs supported DRS, they mostly focused on targets for reuse, including financing a deposit for refill-ables, and were very sceptical about a deposit system for recycling.<sup>29</sup> In a joint paper contribution to the debate, France Nature Environment, Surfrider, WWF, Tara Ocean and Zero Waste France stated that, as environmental organisations, their aims were reducing the disposable packaging placed on the market and increasing the use of reusable packaging.<sup>30</sup> In fact, while further reuse provides undeniable environmental benefits, pushing for refill without an underpinning DRS hampers the uptake of reuse and refill by creating an uneven playing field (see Box 4.4).

The French example shows how an unusual coalition of players united against DRS, resulting in the loss of critical time that could have been used to develop infrastructure, steer consumer behaviour towards returning beverage containers and reduce plastic pollution. It also shows the government missed a trick by not including glass and the reuse target in its DRS proposal from the start. While the French reuse target sends an important signal, without DRS on all beverage containers, it remains a lost opportunity to prevent plastic pollution.



Non, les bouteilles d’eau ne finissent pas dans la mer

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**Jean-Luc Petithuguenin**  
PDG chez PAPREC GROUP

1 articolo + Segui

Hier matin, j’étais invité de :l’Eco de France Info. C’était l’occasion de dénoncer une « fake news ». Il est en effet faux de dire que les bouteilles d’eau, en France, finissent à la mer.

La pollution des océans par des emballages plastiques est dramatique et indéniable. Mais ces emballages viennent de pays qui ne bénéficient pas de système de gestion des déchets. En France, il existe un des systèmes de gestion des déchets les plus évolués au monde. Les bouteilles d’eau v sont collectées à 98% !

Figure 4.5: ‘Not a single French plastic bottle ended up in the oceans.’

Source: Statement released by Founder and CEO of Paprec Group Jean-Luc Petithuguenin.<sup>31</sup>

a Poll conducted by The Institut français d’opinion publique (IFOP) for the organisation Agir pour l’environnement on 20 - 22 March 2019 via a self-administered online questionnaire with a sample size of 1,004. 55% voted strongly in favour of introducing a DRS on glass bottles; 35% voted partly in favour. Merceron, A. and Moizo, M. (2019) *Ifop pour Agir pour l’environnement: Les Français et le plastique* [ONLINE] Available at: [https://www.agirpourenvironnement.org/sites/default/files/communiqués\\_presses/190401%20-%20Sondage%20Plastique.pdf](https://www.agirpourenvironnement.org/sites/default/files/communiqués_presses/190401%20-%20Sondage%20Plastique.pdf)

b Poll conducted by Ipsos on 17 - 20 September 2019 via a self-administered online questionnaire with a sample size of 2,138. Reloop (2020) *Fact sheet: Public support for Deposit-Return Systems (2003-2020)* [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.reloopplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Table-of-Polling-Studies-2003-2020-updated-10March2020.pdf>

c Poll conducted by Oceans sans Plastiques, Tara Océan Foundation, in partnership with the Harris Interactive Institute on 22 - 27 November 2019 via an online questionnaire with a sample size of 1,044 people, representative of the French population aged 18 and over and an over-sample making it possible to obtain 546 young people under 35. Tara Océan Fondation (2019) *84% des Millenials favorables à la mise en place de la consigne* [ONLINE] Available at: <https://oceans.taraexpeditions.org/m/environnement/ocean-homme-et-pollution/etude-millenials-consigne/#>

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