



A reverse vending machine that pays for glass, aluminium and plastic containers at the Ikea store in Edinburgh, Scotland. – Filepic

Money to be added to plastic bottles

Britain is considering a deposit return scheme on bottles to combat the epidemic of plastic trash.

A RETURN scheme for plastic bottles could soon allow British consumers to enjoy a drink of juice or water without adding to a sea of pollution – as well as getting some of their money back (For Malaysians, this is similar to the five sen deposit for glass bottles of soft drinks back in the 1960s and 70s).

The idea of a deposit return scheme (DRS) for bottles has won the backing of two supermarkets, Iceland and the Co-op, the first major retailers to support the policy to promote recycling and tackle ocean plastic pollution.

"Introducing a DRS may well add to our costs of doing business. However, we believe it is a small price to pay for the long term sustainability of this planet," said Richard Walker, director for sustainability at Iceland Foods, in a statement.

"I urge all other retailers to do the right thing and follow suit."

A deposit return scheme involves consumers paying a small deposit that is refunded when they return empty plastic bottles and is common in many parts of the world including Denmark, Germany and Australia.

From fishing lines to flip flops, there are more than five trillion (5,000,000,000,000) pieces of plastic floating in the world's oceans, according to a 2014 study.

As concern grows about vast floating fields of plastic debris, environmental groups are lobbying the government and retailers to take action to catch up with other countries on cutting plastic littering and marine pollution.

"We hope that other supermarkets will see the way the wind is blowing on this issue ... and follow Iceland and the Co-op in recognising that our oceans should not be our rubbish bin," said Tisha Brown of Greenpeace UK.

In London, consumers

expressed support for a bottle deposit scheme.

"Not only would I benefit financially, albeit minutely, it would make the process of recycling simpler and easier," said 30-year-old train driver Ahmed said on WhatsApp.

Successful in other countries

Such a move would follow Britain's decision in 2015 to charge five pence (27 sen) for plastic carrier bags, legislation that slashed usage and has taken about nine billion plastic bags out of circulation.

"I think (a deposit scheme) would be a good incentive," said Sahar Eljack, 26, adding that small local shops and not just large supermarket chains should take part.

Britain recycled just over half of the bottles that were sold in 2016, well behind the rates achieved in Denmark and South Australia where deposit return schemes boosted rates to as high as 90%.

France has banned plastic shopping bags, adding disposable plastic cups and plates from 2020 while Kenya will soon bring in a ban on household and commercial plastic packaging after a successful grassroots social media campaign.

Scotland has already committed to introducing a deposit return scheme.

"We're pleased to learn that Iceland and the Co-op recognise the big part that a deposit return scheme could play in reducing litter on our high streets, in the countryside and in our seas," a spokeswoman for Zero Waste Scotland charged with designing Scotland's deposit scheme, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The rest of the UK has yet to

commit to such a scheme, although in April the government established a working group to formulate a national litter strategy and look at different voluntary and regulatory options to improve recycling.

"We recognise there is more to do in this area, and we will be working with industry to explore how we can reduce the amount of single-use plastic waste as part of our resource and waste strategy," said a spokesman for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Britain's environment minister Michael Gove tweeted that he was "haunted" by British naturalist David Attenborough's *Blue Planet II* TV series that highlighted plastic waste in oceans and said he would take action.

And finance minister Philip Hammond said the government will look into ways to reduce plastic waste through the tax system and charges on single-use plastic items.

But such moves may face resistance from the plastic industry. The British Plastics Federation said deposit schemes may not be popular with consumers and could "undermine the existing kerbside system" whereby waste bins are regularly collected from streets outside homes and businesses.

But Iceland, a frozen food chain, said there is no time to lose and has offered to trial "reverse vending machines" in British stores to make returning bottles easier for customers.

"This cannot carry on. It is causing untold damage to our oceans and wildlife," said Iceland's Walker.

"It is a ticking time bomb for humanity, since we all ultimately depend on a healthy ocean environment for our own survival." – Thomson Reuters Foundation