



Return and Earn, New South Wales's Container Deposit Scheme, was recognised at the Stewardship Excellence awards 2022 for Best Stewardship Outcomes by a Collective Scheme. Delivered in a partnership between scheme coordinator Exchange for Change, network operator TOMRA Cleanaway and regulator NSW Environment Protection Authority, its stewardship of beverage containers has resulted in high community engagement, and strong social and environmental outcomes. Judges noted a commendable use of data around engagement and participation including through the Impact Calculator to help users understand the positive impact of their involvement in the scheme.

"Receiving an award judged by experts builds further credibility for the scheme and helps all participants, from the public using Return and Earn to the beverage suppliers who fund it, to have confidence in the outcomes the scheme sets out to achieve," said Danielle Smalley, the CEO of Exchange for Change – the scheme coordinator of Return and Earn. "To receive the award and the tick of approval from the Centre of Excellence for Return and Earn is very valuable."

"The initial infrastructure rollout across New South Wales ensuring convenience and easy access was no small undertaking as it is a consumer facing scheme critical to its success. Five years later, we have over six hundred return points across NSW. Our Return and Earn machines make up half of all return points and feature smart technology which allows us to collect live data. As well as giving a live count of containers collected, we can provide live status updates on the Return and Earn website, showing if machines are available for returns, approaching capacity or full."

"A key challenge has been changing consumer behaviour over a relatively short period. We started with raising awareness of the scheme, then educated people on the benefits of returning containers, and showed them it was easy to participate. We continue to see high levels of support and trust with participation growing year-on-year. What's really positive is that people are making Return and Earn part of their regular routine, with the majority of returning their containers monthly. Users do have to put in a level of effort to participate, they must collect their containers and take them to a return point to receive the refund, but we've managed to communicate that the benefit is greater than that effort whether it's the financial reward they get or the positive environmental outcomes they're contributing to."

Since its establishment in December 2017, Return and Earn has collected more than 9.6 billion drink containers through its network of return points and has contributed to a fifty-four percent reduction in beverage container litter from pre-scheme levels. Return and Earn's self-serve machines and the Return and Earn app also allow users to donate their refunds directly to one of 170+ charities listed. To date more than \$42 million has been raised for charities and community groups through the scheme from donations and fees from hosting return points.

"We want to build on the scheme's success," said Ms Smalley when asked what's next for Return and Earn. "Expanding the containers accepted in the scheme is something that is already being explored by the NSW Government. A future challenge, and what I think is the next step, is more harmonisation. Currently, all container deposit schemes in Australia are state-based initiatives, and there are slight differences between them. This can be challenging for beverage suppliers who supply to all jurisdictions."

"We'd also like to better understand the true value being generated by the scheme for the broader community. There are clearly environmental benefits, as well as savings in energy, water, and carbon emissions from not using virgin materials to make new containers. There are also economic benefits in terms of the money put back in the community's pocket, as well as job creation. But there is also incredible social value generated through Return and Earn. What we've seen is an extraordinary number of community groups, charities and sporting clubs fundraising through the scheme to help fund the incredible work they're doing."

What advice would Ms Smalley offer those starting out in Product Stewardship? "You need to be able to articulate the value proposition, why should stakeholders participate. And value means different things to different groups – develop a value proposition through different lenses – the consumers, industry, charities, environmental groups, government. With any stewardship program you also need to build trust into that value proposition particularly and that means providing transparency about what happens to the material being collected and being confident that it's being recycled."