

Recycling in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador: Depots as social enterprise

Leslie Vryenhoek / May 2026



INTERNATIONAL
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Please cite this publication as: Vryenhoek, Leslie. 2026. Recycling in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador: Depots as social enterprise. Ground Score Association and International Alliance of Waste Pickers.

Mike Wadden demonstrates the use of an Xpress screen (this one on an outside UCycle). This allows customers to print bar-coded tags and drop off their recyclables, which will be counted later and credited to their account. Photo: L. Vryenhoek

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SUMMARY

In Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada's easternmost province, a deposit-return system on beverage containers is managed by a provincial agency. Consumers gain access to refunds on beverage containers through a network of independently-owned and licensed "Green Depots," which receive a per-container handling fee. Both for-profit and not-for-profit enterprises can receive licenses to operate these Green Depots. Currently, there are 53 depots in communities throughout the province.

This paper concerns itself with the Used Beverage Container Recycling Program as it occurs in the capital city of St. John's. In particular, the paper examines the model of the city's Green Depot operator, Ever Green Environmental (also known as Ever Green Recycling), a not-for-profit social enterprise with a mandate to provide employment to people from marginalized populations. In all of the recycling depots it operates, Ever Green accommodates the varying needs of staff, many of whom have mental health or intellectual disability issues. Other employees are refugees and require translation and pictorial instructions, among other accommodations.

This paper also looks at waste pickers in St. John's (called professional recyclers), how they have traditionally operated in the community, and the potential impact of new technology on their livelihoods.

Through automation to improve efficiency and accuracy and by diversifying its work and bringing in new recycling streams, Ever Green has been able to sustain employment at high levels. It has also digitized its drop-off systems, making it more convenient for all local residents to recycle beverage containers and get their refunds. This has increased the amount of material—and thus revenue—Ever Green receives. Anecdotal evidence, however, indicates these measures may have a negative effect on the amount of material available to professional recyclers in St. John's.

¹ The entire province of Newfoundland and Labrador's population is almost 550,000 people (Statistics Canada, 3rd quarter of 2025). At 405,720 square kilometers (156,649 square miles), its landmass is slightly bigger than that of the state of Montana and slightly smaller than that of California.

² According to World Population Review (2025), the city has an estimated population of over 111,800 people in 2025, swelling to almost 240,000 when the extended metropolitan area is considered.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Across the last three decades, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada's easternmost province, has implemented a comprehensive strategy to better manage its solid waste and improve environmental outcomes. It has closed waste disposal sites that were not environmentally sound, ended incineration practices and broadened waste diversion. Beginning in the late 1990s, it introduced several recycling and diversion programs, including a Used Beverage Container Recycling Program, which is a deposit-return system (DRS).

Legal and Strategic Framework

Recycling in Newfoundland and Labrador falls under the direction of the [Multi-Material Stewardship Board \(MMSB\)](#). Established in 1997, MMSB is a provincial government agency mandated to support and promote modern waste management practices, including recycling. This is achieved through various programs and initiatives, including the used beverage container DRS and the used tire management program. MMSB also oversees, assists with and partners in province-wide [Extended Producer Responsibility \(EPR\)](#) programs for leftover paint, electronic waste and used oil and glycol. In addition, it provides project funding for innovative waste reduction initiatives and engages in public education.

MMSB derives its mandate from the [Environmental Protection Act and Waste Management Regulations](#), which became law in 2003 and was most recently amended in 2022, as well as the [Provincial Waste Management Strategy](#) of 2002. This strategy, like the MMSB's informational materials and the legislation itself, does not concern itself with who will do the work or give any consideration to income generation.

The [Provincial Waste Management Strategy](#),³ published in 2002, spoke of five key elements to enable the province to create more modern waste management systems:

- increasing waste diversion
- establishing waste management regions
- developing modern standards and technology
- educating the public, and
- maximizing the economic and employment opportunities.

Within the 2002 strategy, the focus of those “economic and employment opportunities” refers to either public service management of waste or industry and private business growth. There is no mention of social enterprises, cooperatives, independent agents, informal recyclers or anything else relating to those who have traditionally done the work of waste pickers.⁴

An implementation strategy (2007) focused on minimizing the amount of waste going to landfills, modernizing waste handling facilities (including closing over 70% of existing landfills) and ending incineration and burning.⁵ The initial goals included a 50% reduction in waste going to landfills by 2010. This timeline was later moved to 2020, though a review in 2019 found there had only been a 25% reduction.⁶

By 2022-23 (the last year for which numbers are available), about 70% of beverage containers were recycled in the province, up from 62% in 2014.⁷ Recycling rates seem to have plateaued at 70% for several years, except for a dip to 61% in 2020-21 during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

³ Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Environment, 2002.

⁴ MMSB's [2023-26 Strategic Plan](#) also does not mention employment or workers, though it does mention not-for-profit and community organizations as primary partners (MMSB, 2023b, p. 4).

⁵ Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Environment, Conservation and Climate Change, 2025a.

⁶ Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Environment, Conservation and Climate Change, 2025b.

⁷ Morawski, Clarissa, Wilcox, Jason and Samantha Millette, 2016.

⁸ MMSB, 2024.

Recycling containers collected at Green Depots in St. John's and surrounding communities go to Hebert's Recycling, a plant in Mount Pearl, NL (near St. John's) where they are processed. All plastic containers (including PET and HDPE) are shredded and sent to manufacturers in Eastern Canada, aluminum flattened for shipment to a manufacturer in Kentucky, and metal from cans is sent to a manufacturer in Montreal, then sold to markets throughout North America.⁹ Glass containers are shipped to a facility in New Brunswick.¹⁰

USED BEVERAGE CONTAINER RECYCLING PROGRAM¹¹

Deposit-Refund Amounts

MMSB has licensed 53 Green Depots throughout the province to accept ready-to-serve beverage containers on which a deposit was paid. To receive and maintain a license to operate a Green Depot, "franchisees" must adhere to MMSB's very detailed standards. These cover business and accounting practices and everything from the number of counting tables and parking spaces (based on volume of containers received) to paint colours and signage. In exchange, depots have an exclusive territory. In urban areas, no competitor can operate within 3 kilometers; in rural areas, the range is 20 kilometers.

Within this system, what is referred to as the deposit is higher than the refund amount. According to MMSB, the difference "is used to fund the collection, transportation and processing costs associated with recycling" (MMSB website, FAQs) and as such, is really a deposit combined with a levy. This paper makes that distinction.



Photo of the inside of an MMSB brochure, "How to Get Refund Ready."
Photo: L. Vryenhoek

⁹ Whiffen, Glen. 2018, August 24, *The Telegram*; MMSB, no date.

¹⁰ MMSB, no date. <https://mmsb.nl.ca/programs/used-beverage-containers/>

¹¹ The information in this section is drawn from MMSB's website: <https://mmsb.nl.ca/programs/used-beverage-containers/> (MMSB, no date.)

The deposit and refund amounts have not changed since 2003 and are as follows.

8-cent deposit + levy (5-cent refundable deposit + 3-cent levy) applies to:

- All aluminum beverage cans (alcoholic and non-alcoholic)
- Plastic containers containing non-alcoholic beverages (and 50ml miniature liquor bottles)
- Other metal beverage containers (such as juice) – all sizes
- Glass containers of non-alcoholic beverages, non-refillable beer bottles and 50ml miniature liquor bottles
- Tetra and gable-top non-alcoholic beverage containers except milk and similar products (see exceptions, below)
- All drink pouches, whether alcoholic or non-alcoholic, including “wine-in-a-box” bags

20-cent deposit + levy (10-cent refundable deposit + 10-cent levy) applies to:

- All glass alcoholic (wine and spirits) beverage containers (except those in the category above)
- All plastic alcoholic (wine and spirits) beverage containers (except those in the category above)
- Only beverage containers bought in Newfoundland and Labrador are eligible for a refund through the Green Depot system.

Exceptions not Included in Program

These containers are not part of the provincial deposit-return system and are not accepted at Green Depots:

- Milk and similar products (baby formula, plant-based milk alternatives and meal replacement beverages) considered essential nutrition
- Concentrated beverages (those that must be mixed before drinking)
- Distilled water containers
- Containers greater than 5 litres

Refillable domestic beer bottles—typically brown bottles—are another exception. Not part of MMSB’s program, these are managed by the beer industry. They carry a 10-cent deposit and a 10-cent refund. Beer is sold at provincially operated liquor stores (which do not take returns), retail outlets licensed to sell beer (usually convenience stores), and bars and restaurants. According to the [NL Liquor Corporation website](#), empty bottles can be returned to “brewer’s agents” (retailers) for the full bottle deposit of 10 cents, but retailers are only required to accept returns in the same number as full bottles being purchased. Beer distributors, on the other hand, must accept all empty bottles and return the 10-cent bottle deposit with no purchase necessary. Refillable beer bottles have a 96% recovery rate.¹²

When a consumer purchases a beverage container in the province, they are charged a deposit plus levy (8 cents for most; 20 cents for spirits and wine, as above). The retailer remits the full deposit amount to MMSB.

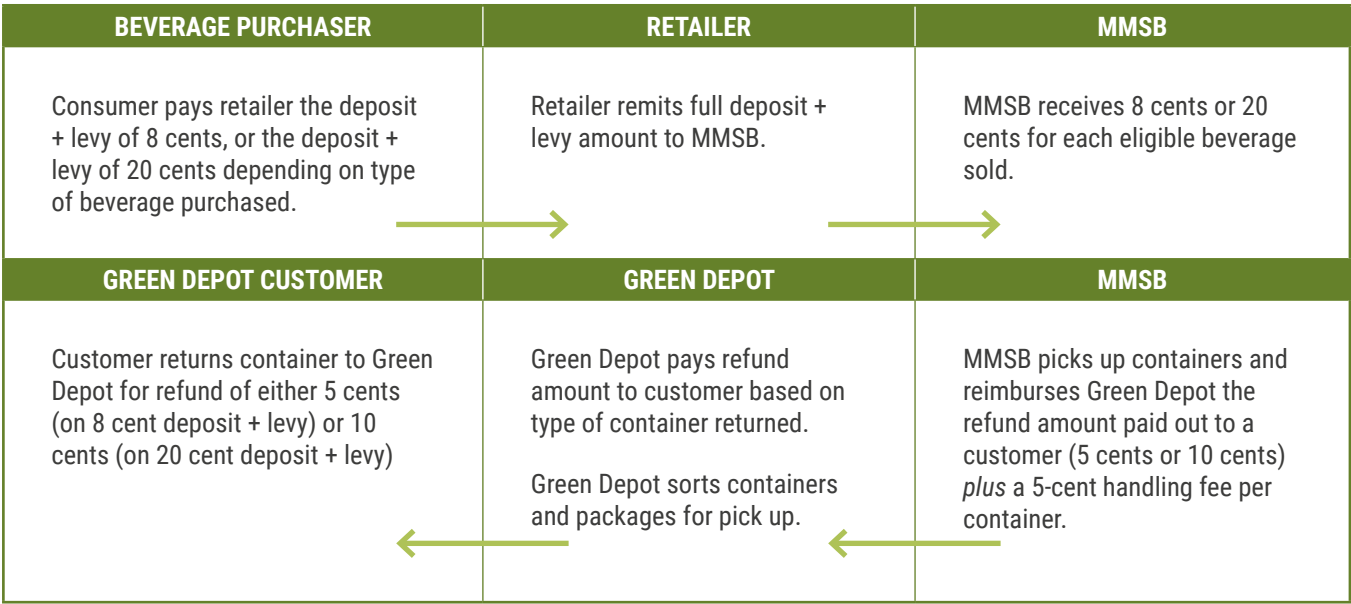
When a customer brings containers to a Green Depot, the Green Depot pays the customer a refund (either 5 cents or 10 cents, respectively). MMSB picks up the containers for processing and pays the depot the full amount of all refunds paid, plus a 5-cent handling fee for each container. Thus a Green Depot receives 10 cents for containers for which they refunded 5 cents, and 15 cents on containers for which they refunded 10 cents.

Since a Green Depot always gets a 5-cent handling fee on a container, sometimes MMSB pays out more for a container than it received (receiving 8 cents and paying out 10 cents), while for items on which a 20-cent deposit was charged, it retains 5 cents. MMSB also gets revenue from the nearly 30% of beverage containers not returned for refund (a small percentage are placed in curbside recycling; see below) and from the sale of materials to the recycling industry. That revenue funds the beverage container program, while revenue from this and other recycling programs funds public education, projects and administration.¹³

¹² Morawski, 1999.

¹³ MMSB, 2024.

The flow of Deposit/Refund Money



EVER GREEN ENVIRONMENTAL¹⁴



Photo of the inside of an MMSB brochure, "How to Get Refund Ready."
Photo: L. Vryenhoek

¹⁴ Except where otherwise cited, the material in this section derives from interviews and discussions held with Ever Green CEO Mike Wadden between June and September 2025, along with a site visit in August 2025.

From Sheltered Workshop to Social Enterprise

A decade before the deposit-return system on beverage containers was implemented, Ever Green was established in St. John's as a clinical workshop for individuals with mental health challenges. In 1993, it was registered as a Canadian charity with a mandate "to help individuals recovering from serious mental illness find and maintain meaningful employment." Workshop participants did small-scale recycling tasks, learning to recycle aluminum cans, paper and cardboard, but were not paid. Mental health clinicians ran the program.

Although the objective was to prepare people for employment, according to Ever Green President and CEO Mike Wadden, it became apparent that the program didn't work for anyone. Wadden, whose background is in public health, said clinicians who ran the program didn't want to be managing a recycling depot, and participants were not prepared for employment because the expectations and outcomes weren't "real" and they weren't being paid.

In addition, because participants relied on social assistance to meet their needs, they knew if they transitioned to paid employment outside the program, they risked losing at least some of that assistance.

Wadden came on board in 2003 and four years later, led Ever Green's transition from a sheltered workshop to a social enterprise operating a full-fledged, licensed green depot in MMSB's system. Staff were paid more than minimum wage, and systems and safeguards were put in place to fill any social assistance gaps. Wadden said workers quickly embraced purposeful work, and their conversations shifted from talking about their mental health challenges to talking about future plans. Many of the original employees stayed in their jobs for years, even decades, before retiring.



Ever Green CEA Mike Wadden stands with bulk bags of recyclables ready for pick up in the Green Depot at Blackmarsh Road. Across its depots, Ever Green handles 225,000 beverage containers each day—or about 53 million units annually. Photo: L. Vryenhoek

Across 30 years, Ever Green expanded to five locations in the larger St. John's metropolitan area¹⁵ and is a thriving social enterprise. Although it operates fewer than 10% of the 53 licensed Green Depots in the province, Ever Green takes in about 20% of the recyclables that are returned to the system. It has also diversified its income streams, as discussed below. However, it maintains its charitable designation (conferred by the Canadian government) and its mandate.¹⁶ That mandate has broadened to include providing work opportunities for other vulnerable populations, including newcomers to Canada, particularly refugees.

Accommodations for Workers

Accommodations to help workers navigate their challenges were important in the beginning, and are important now. Wadden said these continuously shift as the needs of individual workers change. Currently, about 16 accommodations are in place, ranging from adapted working conditions to allowing multiple breaks to ensure people can rest and recharge. As well, all processes are broken into a series of steps, so that someone who cannot, for instance, comfortably do steps 1 and 2 can be assigned to do steps 3 and 4.



Ever Green workers sort cans and bottles in the back of house area of the Blackmarsh facility, where a system of conveyor belts helps with processing. Photo courtesy of Ever Green Recycling.

¹⁵ The pace of acquiring new depots is limited by the availability of depot opportunities within the system. Wadden said if there was opportunity, Ever Green could launch multiple new depots annually.

¹⁶ While most of the province's green depots are run as small for-profit enterprises, at least four others in the province operate as social enterprises in the recycling network. The Green Depot in the small town of Lewisporte in central Newfoundland, for example, is operated by the Calypso Foundation, which provides employment opportunities to adults with cognitive disabilities.

Where Ever Green once had mental health clinicians on staff to support workers, workers now receive a comprehensive health insurance package through a group insurance plan. Workers can manage their own care needs and benefits within the plan. Wadden also notes that absenteeism was reduced by combining sick leave with annual vacation leave—those who don't use their allotted sick days can tag them onto their vacation. This policy has dramatically decreased the incidence of people calling in sick, since workers want to save up their allotted time.

Accommodations also serve refugees, who face particular barriers to employment, especially language barriers, as well as carrying the trauma of what drove them from their country of origin. Accommodations for refugees include ensuring processes can be explained with simple, non-verbal instructions. Lengthy leaves of absence are also granted should a refugee need to return to their home region (they cannot return to their country of origin without losing their refugee status) for weddings or other important cultural events.

Wadden explained that the workforce is fully integrated, and it is not apparent who has a chronic and persistent mental illness and who has no diagnosed issue.

"Before, the clinicians used to be the managers. Now we have people who used to be the clients who are the managers," Wadden explained. "And we have people who have no issues being managed by people who have issues, and nobody knows."

Options for customers at Ever Green Depot

In-Person Drop Off

Customers can bring their used beverage containers for a cash refund to any one of the five depots during hours of operation. Three of the Ever Green Depots are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. six days per week (every day but Sunday), while two are open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. five days per week (closing on either a Monday or Wednesday).

There is no limit to how much a customer can bring at any one time.



At stations in the facility, workers receive beverage containers from customers. They dump the containers into repurposed bathtubs for sorting, and operate a touchscreen to record what the customers have dropped off. Photo courtesy of Ever Green Recycling.

At the Blackmarsh Road depot, where Ever Green is headquartered, five counting stations are typically staffed. Before the establishment of the Xpress System (discussed below), customers had to wait in line at busier times to attend one of the counting stations. Customers' recyclables are dumped into old repurposed, freestanding bathtubs on stands, and a staff member sorts and counts the containers by type, keying the amounts into a register that tallies the refund. Each station has a cash register, so a receipt is printed, and the customer is paid cash right there at the counter.^{17,18}

Behind each bathtub are large bulk bags, into which containers are thrown by type after they have been counted. Each bulk bag contains an exact number of containers per type. When a floor manager determines a bag on the line is full, it is tagged with its exact count, given a barcode so it can be tracked, and placed in the back for shipping.



A computerized tracking system has streamlined the system, making sure that each container is counted only once. Wadden's advice on automating: "You really want to buy the good gear because you're going to put it through hell." Photo: L. Vryenhoek

The tracking system, operated from a computerized system located behind the counting stations, has streamlined the whole process, Wadden said. This has benefitted the bottom line. When everything was done manually, Ever Green staff counted each container multiple times during its movement through the system and mistakes were made. When they automated, they discovered counting errors and omissions were costing the enterprise a small fortune (approximately \$80,000 CAD) a year.

MMSB picks up bulk bags daily and delivers them to the processing plants.

¹⁷ When the author of this paper attended the Elizabeth Avenue location to drop off recyclables, the system was the same, except only one counting table was staffed, and cash was paid out by a second staff person down the line. It was a slow time, and no other customers were present. Thus it appears operational flexibility is built into the system.

¹⁸ Previously, there was only one cash register at each depot. According to Wadden, when they shifted to cash at each counter, it improved the operations significantly.

Xpress System



Mike Wadden demonstrates the use of an Xpress screen (this one on an outside UCycle). This allows customers to print bar-coded tags and drop off their recyclables, which will be counted later and credited to their account. Photo: L. Vryenhoek

For the past decade, Ever Green customers have had an alternative to standing in line to drop off their recyclables for a refund through the Xpress system.¹⁹ Xpress works like this: a customer brings their recyclables in bags (usually customers use standard garbage or curbside recycling bags) to the depot. Just inside the doors, an Xpress machine (which looks much like an ATM) allows the person to punch in their account number (typically a ten-digit phone number) and the number of bags they have brought to recycle. The machine then spits out stickers, each with a unique code for the customer to affix to each bag. The labels are assigned to their account, and an email is generated for the customer confirming the number of bags brought in and the time and date. Within a maximum of 10 days, the recyclables in the bags will be counted and sorted by Green Depot staff, the labels scanned, and the correct refund amount automatically credited to the customer's account. At this point, a second email is generated, relaying to the customer detailed information on the container count and refund amount, as well as the account balance.

¹⁹ Since Ever Green opened, customers have had the option of dropping off their recyclables in the "donation" area rather than waiting in the depot, which is noisy (staff typically wear ear protection) and smells of stale beverages.



A bar-coded sticker on a bag. The code will be scanned and the bag's contents sorted and counted by staff when time permits.
Photo: L. Vryenhoek

Customers can also access a web page with all the details and transactions on their account.

At any time, a customer can request a payout from their account by sending an email to the Green Depot (there is a \$500 daily limit on these transfers). The amount requested is then e-transferred to the customer, or customers can request a cheque. Customers can also request a payout in cash at a Green Depot.

”

Asked whether automation reduced the need for employees in the Ever Green Depots, Wadden's reply was emphatic: *“Everything gives jobs. The more you can do to make it easy for people to recycle, the more recycling you're going to get.”*

The Xpress System was developed by Ever Green, which has its own IT arm. It is now operational in all of Newfoundland and Labrador through a contract that saw Ever Green license the software to MMSB and all Green Depots in the province. However, currently only customers in St. John's can avail of the web page option.



On the left, bags of bar-coded drop-offs await their turn to be counted. At centre, baled recyclables are ready for pick up by MMSB. In the background on the right, staff at the Blackmarsh Road facility sort and count materials. Photo: L. Vryenhoek

Because the Green Depot holds personal information, high-level security is built into the computerized system to avoid breaches of data. To date, there have been no security issues.

UCycle

St. John's customers also have the option to use the UCycle 24/7 Automated Recycle Depot—a shipping container located outside each of Ever Green's depots. This provides anytime access to recycling drop-off. The UCycle is equipped with an Xpress screen, and the same procedure is followed. Once the labels have been printed, the locked hatches unlock for a limited time, and the customer can place their bags inside. Security lights and cameras, in addition to the locking system, are in place to prevent theft, while solar panels on the container serve as an energy source.

The UCycle was developed in-house, making use diverse technical expertise on the team.



Secured UCycle containers at Blackmarsh Road and Elizabeth Avenue facilities (left to right) represent different stages of the UCycle's development. Both have solar panels to augment their electrical power sources, and both allow Ever Green account holders to drop off recyclables 24 hours a day. Photos: L. Vryenhoek



Detailed instructions on UCycle containers are one of many ways Ever Green communicates with its customers. Photos: L. Vryenhoek

Software tracks not only how many bags have been dropped off—based on the labels printed by customers²⁰—but what time they used the machine. Tracking this timing allows a depot to determine what hours the UCycle needs to be operational. While Ever Green's UCycles all operate 24/7, Wadden notes that other depots may decide to shut down at particular low-usage times for reasons like battery conservation or to avoid vandalism/theft in the night.

The first UCycle was installed at Blackmarsh Road as a prototype, and improvements were made to the model before subsequent UCycles were installed in the other depots. Wadden believes it is now commercially ready, though work continues on making the design as rugged as possible to withstand any conditions, including the extreme cold of the North West Territories, where Ever Green has leased its Xpress system.

²⁰ Wadden notes that this record is important since occasionally, a customer prints extra, intending to take them home for next time. This creates a discrepancy in the count. The best prevention is good communication with customers about what to do and not do—emails are sent detailing this when necessary.

Customer Adoption of Technology

According to Wadden, the Xpress system has made it very easy to recycle. When the system was put in place about a decade ago, customers were slow to adopt it. In recent years, however, adoption of the Xpress system has skyrocketed. Today, 70% of recyclables received utilize the Xpress system; as of August 2025, Ever Green had about 25,000 individual Xpress accounts. The growth is due in large part to heavy public campaigning by the MMSB and increasing comfort levels among the public for automated financial systems.

Nonetheless, about 30% of recyclables are still brought to the counter to be sorted and counted by staff who provide the customer with cash immediately. Many of those who prefer this method are professional recyclers—the term used for waste pickers in St. John’s—and others in the low-income strata.

During the restrictive era of the Covid-19 pandemic, when depots could not operate cash tables and personal contact was limited, Ever Green helped professional recyclers open bank accounts so they could use the automated system, earning income despite the restrictions. However, post-pandemic, most returned to wanting to be paid in cash.

It is possible that by making recycling so convenient for the public, the Xpress system has negatively impacted the amount of material available for professional recyclers. This is discussed further on in this paper.

Ever Green’s Diversified Revenue Streams

While the bulk of its money comes from the 5-cent handling fee that MMSB pays it for each of the 53 million beverage containers it handles annually, Ever Green has diversified its income base beyond beverage containers. Since the enterprise’s biggest costs are staff and facilities, this necessitates new streams of income. The handling fee has not kept up with increases in minimum wage, rising utility costs and other inflationary pressures.

In 2024, Ever Green’s total revenue was \$5.019 million CAD and its expenditures were \$5.053 million CAD, of which \$1.574 million CAD was compensation paid to employees.²¹ Wadden said the enterprise is now 97% self-sufficient and receives only small government grants for staff training.

Technical and Consulting Support

Ever Green has its own IT arm, and it exports the digitized systems it has created and its expertise. It was first contracted by MMSB to replicate these systems in Green Depots across Newfoundland and Labrador. Today, all depots in the province run the same software. Ever Green also earns revenue providing technical support and consultation for these depots. Eight years ago, Ever Green sold the service to the North West Territories, and it has done consulting in many Canadian provinces. It expects to sell and support the software in other Atlantic Canadian provinces in the near future.²²

Beer Bottles

While most Green Depots do not accept refillable beer bottles—which carry a 10-cent deposit and a 10-cent refund—as part of the Used Container Recycling Program, Ever Green has developed a sideline revenue source from them. It accepts them from customers but refunds only 5 cents and then sells them to breweries for 10 cents. Thus it keeps 5 cents as a handling fee from these as well.

²¹ See Appendix B: Ever Green’s financial information for 2023-24.

²² At the time of this research, software leasing costs from Ever Green were \$180 CAD per screen.

Paper and Cardboard

Ever Green has also expanded into recycling other materials. At its main facility at Blackmarsh Road, the company has purchased a baler. Today, it recycles 3,000 tons of paper fiber that is sold to manufacturers, primarily to produce toilet paper, in Canada, China and other places.



Ever Green processes office paper and cardboard for Eastern Health, which provides another stream of income. Photo courtesy of Ever Green Recycling.

The paper comes through a partnership with Eastern Health, the province's largest health authority—responsible for managing all health care facilities including hospitals in the eastern part of the province. Wadden cautions that because paper and cardboard require a large volume and are easily contaminated, it only pays off for large-scale commercial contracts. He pointed to a large pile of cardboard, noting that all of it, flattened out, might be worth \$60.

”Recycling is about scale, and we don't have the scale [in Newfoundland and Labrador]. You have to think about our location—it's distant from markets, and it's a small market. So this is a worst-case scenario,” Wadden explained.



Ever Green takes used plastic dining material such as trays from hospitals (in crates, above right), cleans and granulates them (above), then sells the plastic granules to a recycling company. In addition to creating revenue, this creates additional opportunity for employment and solves a waste problem for the health facilities. Photos: L. Vryenhoek

Another contract with Eastern Health creates employment opportunities at Ever Green. As Wadden explains: “We have some people who can’t work in the depots anymore, so we carved out this other income possibility for them. They clean the contaminated serving plates from the hospitals, which otherwise would go in the landfill, and Eastern Health pays us to do it. We wash them, granulate them and ship them to Ontario, where the material is all recycled. We don’t make any money on it, but we create employment.”

Research and Innovation Funding

According to Wadden, Ever Green has undertaken multiple research and project contracts with Memorial University of Newfoundland (the provincial university). Ever Green also takes advantage of innovation funding from MMSB and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), a public funding body. Wadden believes these kinds of research partnership opportunities can benefit any similar social-enterprise involved in recycling in North America.

Donations

Ever Green receives about \$80,000 CAD each year in donations. Much of this is from containers that are dropped off for donation, rather than for refund (Ever Green still receives the 10- or 15-cent payment from MMSB for these). Some corporate donations also come into the charity.

CURBSIDE RECYCLING IN ST. JOHN’S

Ever Green’s depots are not the only option for beverage container recycling in St. John’s. In October 2010, the city began a biweekly curbside collection of recyclable materials: paper and cardboard, plastic, tin, tetrapaks and aluminum.²³ Recycling must be separated by the household or business, with all container recyclables put in one blue bag and paper/cardboard recyclables in a separate blue bag. Bags of recycling that mix both in the same

²³ The city does not allow glass—even glass beverage containers—in the blue bags. Glass beverage containers with a deposit (spirits and wine) can be returned to a Green Depot; other glass is to be discarded in the garbage. The city maintains that the risk of broken glass and the weight of glass both make it a poor choice for their curbside program, and recyclable materials fetch higher market prices when there is no chance of glass shard contamination. MMSB’s 2021 waste audit found that only 2% of garbage consists of glass containers (Curb It St. John’s, website).

bag cannot be processed and go to the landfill.²⁴ Curbside recycling is processed at [Robin Hood Bay](#), the waste management facility in St. John's that serves as an integrated waste disposal site for the province's eastern region.

In 2010, uptake for curbside recycling was swift. Immediately, about 70% of households separated their recycling and placed it in clear blue bags, rather than mixing it in with their garbage.²⁵

St. John's city officials say people are rifling through curbside recycling bags for refundable beverage containers. What do you think?

They should be allowed to do it, as long as they don't make a mess



36.50%
(223 votes)

Refundable items should be put in a separate bag



34.37%
(210 votes)

The city should crack down on this. It's going to create a mess



25.37%
(155 votes)

Let's scrap the recycling program



3.76%
(23 votes)

Survey image: The CBC in St. John's conducted this [informal survey on its website](#) on October 26, 2010. While the sample size is small, it provides a glimpse into the sentiments of St. John's residents around the issue of waste picking.

But within weeks of the program starting, an issue arose with what were dubbed “high-graders”—people who opened the blue bags curbside to get the items worth cash. According to a CBC news report in October 2010: “City councillor Debbie Hanlon described the [waste] pickers as ‘worse than gulls’, referring to the seagulls that rip open bags of trash during garbage collection days.”²⁶

A few months later, CBC reported the city issued a warning that it would prosecute repeat offenders caught taking recyclables from curbsides, since the city was counting on the value of these recyclables for revenue. However, sentiment among the city's population was largely in favour of the professional recyclers, who had been picking up recyclables for years before the city began to (see Survey image).

Very quickly a culture of putting aside recyclables labelled for a professional recycler developed.

PROFESSIONAL RECYCLERS (WASTE PICKERS) IN ST. JOHN'S

Professional recyclers have long been present on St. John's streets. Most distinctly, they push shopping carts laden with bottles and cans along city streets and sidewalks in all manner of weather—which can regularly include gale-force winds, heavy snows and ice storms. They collect both from private residences and from public spaces. They are not organized and generally do not have specific standing or support.

²⁴ Robin Hood Bay, City of St. John's, no date. <https://robinhoodbay.ca/help/faqs/>

²⁵ CBC News, 2011, October 18. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/recycling-exceeds-st-john-s-targets-1.1066130>

²⁶ CBC News, 2010, October 26. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/curb-recycling-high-graders-1.973089>

Projects Involving Professional Recyclers

However, the attention on professional recyclers spawned by the curbside recycling program helped fuel interest from local academics. Two unconnected projects were initiated.

Bottlepreneur

The first was “Bottlepreneur,” a project started in 2010 by Jon King through Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE) at Memorial University, a student group focused on social entrepreneurship and community impact projects. Students spoke with professional recyclers, then went door to door with brochures, pitching the services of the professional recyclers to pick up recyclables.²⁷ They created a sign-up system, designed routes for individual recyclers, and produced a video²⁸ that explained the system to local residents. Advantages for residents over the city’s curbside pickup was that their “bottlepreneur” would take glass bottles and would pick up every week (the city’s pickup was biweekly).

By promoting professional recyclers as service providers and entrepreneurs—not problems—and introducing them by name to residents, they created a structure in which both recyclers and residents felt comfortable and proud of their involvement.²⁹

In the program’s four years, only 16 recyclers were involved. They offered their services to homes and ultimately recycled millions of bottles and cans every year. The project ran until 2014, after which no data is available on it.

Recycling from the Margins

In 2012, an academic working with the Harris Centre—a community outreach agency at Memorial University—undertook a study in which she interviewed several professional recyclers to understand their work, motivations and the community response to them.³⁰ This is documented in the report *Recycling from the Margins: Informal Recycling Networks in St. John’s as Social Interactions* by Michelle Porter.

Porter learned that professional recyclers in St. John’s gained more than income from the work—though many relied on the income to supplement the limited social assistance they received. They also expressed pride in their contributions to the environment and the community and in their ability to do the rigorous work in adverse conditions and be productive.

Porter also asked the recyclers’ customers about these relationships and found they valued the hard work and environmental stewardship, and had a sense that these relationships fostered an inclusive community:

“Stigmatization, although present, appears to be less pronounced in St. John’s [than in other Canadian cities]. Recyclers shared mostly positive stories about their interactions with their customers and the general public. The few negative stories shared were noted for being the exception. There was a general fear of harassment or ticketing by city officials who might challenge whether the recyclables had been stolen from curbside recycling. One recycler described being challenged and that a community member had come out of her house to tell the city employee to leave the bin alone because the recyclables had been left for him.”

Recycling from the Margins, page 38.

²⁷ CBC News, 2012, May 28.

²⁸ King, 2014.

²⁹ King, 2012.

³⁰ All information in this section is from Porter’s 2012 report and from an in-person discussion with Michelle Porter on August 26, 2025.

Porter said relationships were a huge part of what the recyclers valued. In fact, some she talked to expressed great pride in having clients (and disdain for those who dug through public or private garbage bins rather than serving homes). Those relationships paid off through things like Christmas gifts and other generosity.

Each recycler had a route—what Porter called their “traplines”—and they respected one another’s territories.³¹

Personal freedom was another significant driver for the professional recyclers Porter spoke to, noting many had an initial distrust of being interviewed.

That matches what Mike Wadden at Ever Green has experienced. “The professional recyclers, at least the group that I know, they really cherish their independence and their freedom and have a real distrust for government or social programs,” Wadden said. He noted that while he is not aware of anyone working for an Ever Green depot who previously worked as a professional recycler, a few workers at Ever Green left that employment to instead work independently as professional recyclers.

Impact of Xpress System on Professional Recyclers

The convenience of the Xpress System benefits the public and helps ensure continuing support for a deposit-return system operated through independent depots in St. John’s. That automation, however, may have a negative impact on waste pickers who have served the community, sometimes collecting by agreement from households. If consumers find it easy to return their own containers and receive a refund, they may be less inclined to make their empty beverage containers available to professional recyclers.

While no research exists on the impact on professional recyclers of the Xpress System, some evidence suggests that it is being felt. For example, Wadden notes that since easy recycling through Xpress gained popularity, schools and community groups that relied on gathering recyclables to raise funds have seen a decline in that revenue.

Anecdotally, Porter commented that after she conducted her research on professional recyclers in 2012, she witnessed an increase in individuals doing that work in St. John’s; however, she has noted a marked absence of professional recyclers pushing carts through city streets in more recent years. The author of this report, who lived in St. John’s from 2005 until 2021 and recalls the ubiquitous professional recyclers in the streets and outside Green Depots taking donations of recyclables, was unable to locate even one professional recycler during five days in St. John’s in 2025. However, because no official data exists on these workers, it is impossible to know with certainty if their numbers have decreased.

³¹ In the years after she wrote her report, Porter said she noted an increase in competition as a new kind of professional recycler emerged: people in cars began driving neighbourhoods and collecting recyclables in bags from the curbside.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Technical expertise is essential.

Wadden believes an investment in technology and technical expertise is essential for success in a recycling depot. Before transitioning to being part of the city's green depot network, Ever Green brought in industrial engineers to provide skilled and unbiased advice on how best to organize the work of their depots.

"Anything you can dream, you can do."

~Mike Wadden

Wadden highly recommends this, since it can be difficult to see beyond the way a workflow has always been done. Similarly, to create its robust digitized systems, Ever Green employs IT professionals and leverages research partnerships with the local university to bring in the technical experts it needs.

Beverage containers are just a starting place.

"Cast your net larger than beverage containers," Wadden said. "Beverage containers will be a foundation stone—and they create a lot of positive customer interaction." While beverage containers provide a consistent revenue stream, as Ever Green is demonstrating, adding new lines of recycling, even where not as lucrative, can build brand and expand income.

Customer service is paramount for recycling depots.

Even for a social enterprise focused on workers, customer service is paramount, Wadden said. He notes that MMSB's standards for Green Depots are focused primarily on customer service. And he asserts that while people may want to support a social enterprise, ultimately most will take their business to the depot that provides the greatest convenience and the best experience.

"You have to think of it as a service.

Beverage container recycling is a service you're providing, and the service is paid for by the deposit."

~Mike Wadden

This concurs with what Pratarelli (cited in Porter) found:

recycling participation depends on how systems serve consumers. According to Porter: "Pratarelli concludes that although recycling programs are more successful in collectivist societies, individualistic societies can achieve high levels of participation 'provided that sponsored recycling programs demonstrate they share some common values with consumers'" (2010, p. 27).

Porter noted that the experience of professional recycling in St. John's suggests that personal contact and relationship building within the community can lead to a defined customer base, reduce stigma and harassment, and make professional recyclers proud service providers in their communities.

Communication with customers must be top notch.

In all automated systems, good communication with customers is paramount. From signage to online content to emails, clear and cordial instructions help build success. For communication to be effective, it relies on information systems that allow depot operators to understand their customers' behaviour. For example, Ever Green's automated system tracks the number of bag tags a customer has printed. This is important, Wadden noted, because customers sometimes print extra labels, thinking they'll save them for next time—this creates a discrepancy in the system. Instructions to not do this in signage and online, combined with the ability to directly communicate with a specific customer who does not understand the system, can solve the issue.

Public awareness campaigns can counteract stigma.

The Bottlepreneur program demonstrated the value of direct contact with households. Focusing on the value to customers can both build waste pickers businesses and build community relationships. This, in turn, can counteract negative stereotypes and stigma.

Porter offered this suggestion in her 2012 report (p. 42):

“Data from this St. John’s study showed that the cart is a rich symbol of the professional recycler. There is enormous potential for a public relations campaign which focuses upon the cart as the visual symbol of the professional recycler. Such a campaign would increase the value of recycling at the same time as it increased the value of the professional recycler, potentially making way for new and/or different networks to be established between customer and recycler. Increasing the profile of professional recycling without focusing on an individual recycler would reduce the amounts of stigmatization and harassment and open the door for more cooperation with these individuals.”

CONCLUSION

The Deposit Return System on beverage containers in Newfoundland and Labrador was established by the provincial government in order to reduce pressure on landfills, the environment and the public purse. In establishing the system, the province did not concern itself with social or employment needs within the population. Nonetheless, the experience of Ever Green Recycling indicates that it is possible within such a system for a robust social enterprise that provides decent work for marginalized individuals to succeed.

By processing a high volume of recycling and designing workflows that accommodate the variable needs and abilities of diverse employees, Ever Green has created an inclusive workplace for those with mental health or cognitive issues as well as for refugees to Canada. At the same time, it has embraced—and in many cases developed—new technology. Digitized drop-off systems serve the community by making it easier for people to recycle their beverage containers. Automation has also streamlined processing and added traceability to reduce human error and improve the bottom line. These advancements, combined with Ever Green’s growth into new materials and recycling streams, has allowed the enterprise to sustain employment at high levels.

There is much to be admired and learned from Ever Green’s example. Anecdotal evidence, however, indicates that some of the measures designed to make recycling faster and easier for the public may have a detrimental effect on the amount of material waste pickers (professional recyclers) can access in St. John’s. As the technology that Ever Green developed has been implemented throughout Newfoundland and Labrador (and beyond), these negative effects may be widespread.

It is important to note that the low-barrier employment offered by Ever Green was not designed or intended to include professional recyclers. However, Ever Green has served St. John’s waste picking community through its accessible depots, and has provided supports when warranted (such as helping professional recyclers establish bank accounts during the no-contact Covid-19 pandemic).

In working to emulate the success of Ever Green Recycling and embrace automation and diversification, other jurisdictions interested in helping waste pickers maintain their livelihoods while contributing to high recycling rates will want to include waste pickers in the planning processes at all stages. This is essential to identifying pathways for providing decent work opportunities for waste pickers.

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APPENDIX A: RELEVANT LEGISLATION RELATING TO BEVERAGE CONTAINERS

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR REGULATION 59/03

Waste Management Regulations, 2003 under the Environmental Protection Act (O.C. 2003-226)

This legislation also covers the Extended Producer Responsibility programs related to used electronic waste, tires, used oil/glycol and waste paint.

Beverage containers

13.

- 1). A distributor shall not manufacture, sell or distribute a beverage in a beverage container unless the beverage container is
 - a). refillable or recyclable; and
 - b). registered under this section.
- 2). Upon application by a distributor, the board may register a beverage container and may prescribe terms and conditions in the registration.
- 3). In determining whether to register a beverage container, the board shall include consideration of
 - a). the size, shape, colour, composition and UPC code of the container; and
 - b). whether there is on the container an adequate notice that it may be returned for refund.
- 4). The board may cancel the registration of a beverage container.

59/03 s13

Deposits

14.

- 1). A distributor shall collect a deposit of \$0.08 when a beverage in a beverage container is purchased, but where the beverage container contains alcoholic liquor, the deposit collected shall be \$0.20.
 - 1.1). The amount of the deposit referred to in subsection (1) and the refund of the deposit referred to in section 18 includes any applicable tax imposed under Part IX of the Excise Tax Act (Canada).
- 2). A deposit collected by a distributor shall be held in trust for the board by the distributor.
- 3). A distributor shall remit a deposit held in trust under subsection (2) to the board in accordance with an agreement with the board or, in the absence of an agreement, within 7 days after the end of a month.
- 4). Notwithstanding subsection (3), the board may direct the distributor to remit the deposit held in trust under subsection (2), and the distributor shall remit the deposit within 7 days after receiving the direction of the board.
- 5). A beverage in a beverage container is considered to be purchased where, for the purpose of marketing or sales promotion, the purchaser receives the beverage without cost or at a reduced cost.

59/03 s14

Interpretation

15.

For the purpose of sections 13 and 14, where a retailer

- a). manufactures a beverage in the province;
- b). bottles a beverage in a beverage container in the province; or
- c). imports a beverage in a beverage container into the province, and sells the beverage on its premises, the retailer shall be considered to be a distributor.

59/03 s15

Depots

16.

- a). A person shall not operate a depot without a permit.
- b). The board may issue a permit to operate a depot, and may prescribe terms and conditions in the permit.
- c). The board may cancel a permit to operate a depot where the depot operator fails to comply with a provision of the Act or regulations or a term or condition of the permit.

59/03 s16

No depot

17.

- a). The board may authorize an alternate collection scheme for beverage containers where a depot does not exist.
- b). Section 18 applies, with the necessary changes, to a collection scheme under subsection (1).

59/03 s17

Returns and refunds

18.

- 1). A depot operator shall pay a refund of \$0.05 on a beverage container delivered to the depot, but where the beverage container contained alcoholic liquor the refund shall be \$0.10.
- 2). A depot operator shall not refuse to accept a beverage container for refund, except where
 - a). the beverage container is crushed, broken or contaminated;
 - b). the beverage container has no labelling which identifies what it contained; or
 - c). the beverage container was rejected or discarded by the manufacturer during the manufacturing process.

59/03 s18

Program operating budget

19.

- 1). The board shall use revenue from a program under this Part for the implementation and operating expenses of the program.
- 2). Notwithstanding paragraph 8(e), in accordance with a direction of the minister, the board shall pay into the trust fund an amount prescribed by the minister after consultation with the board.

59/03 s19

Offence

20.

- 1). A person who fails to comply with subsection 13(1) is guilty of an offence and is liable to a fine of not more than \$5,000.

APPENDIX B: EVER GREEN FINANCIAL INFORMATION

As a registered charity in Canada, Ever Green Environmental Corp. is governed by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). It is designated a "Public Foundation" by CRA.

A [summary](#) of the most recent year (ending March 31, 2024) shows the following information (all figures are in Canadian dollars):

Total revenue: \$5,018,981.00

Total expenses: \$5,053,377.00

Compensation

- Total compensation for all positions: **\$1,574,102.00**
- Full-time employees: **49**
- Part-time employees: **39**
- Professional and consulting fees: **\$94,606.00**

Compensated full-time positions:

\$1 to \$39,999 - 4

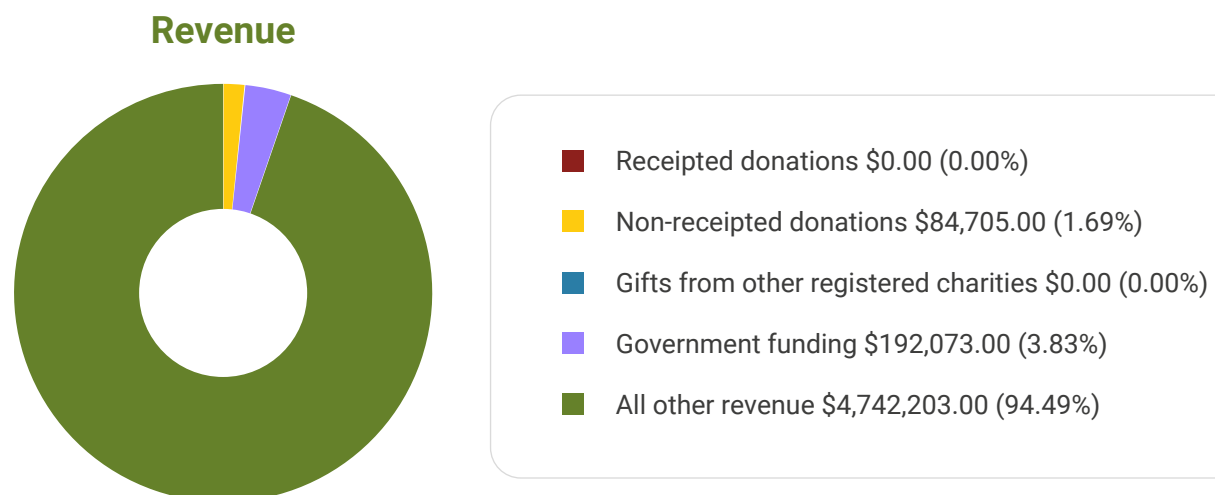
\$40,000 to \$79,999 - 4

\$80,000 to \$119,999 - 1

\$120,000 to \$159,999 - 1

Ever Green's detailed 2024-25 financial statement to the CRA can be viewed online at:

<https://apps.cra-arc.gc.ca/ebci/hacc/srch/pub/dsplyQckVw?selectedCharityBn=895154946RR0001&isSingleResult=false&q.stts=0007>



Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mike Wadden, CEO of Ever Green Environmental, for lending so much of his time and expertise and for providing a comprehensive tour of the Blackmarsh Road facility. Thanks also to Michelle Porter for taking the time to share her knowledge and observations. Taylor Cass Talbott at Ground Score Association was instrumental in the creation, finalization and production of this publication.







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