

Make your camping trip more sustainable by swapping out this one item

ocregister.com/2023/07/14/make-your-camping-trip-more-sustainable-by-swapping-out-this-one-item

Brooke Staggs

July 14, 2023



Though still fully legal, a ban on single-use propane fuel cans got vetoed last year in the California legislature. Now environmental groups are trying to get a law passed to make manufacturers pay to set up a recycling program, and encouraging Californians to seek out reusable versions, on Tuesday, July 11, 2023. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By [Brooke Staggs](#) | bstaggs@scng.com | Southern California News Group

PUBLISHED: July 14, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. | UPDATED: July 14, 2023 at 7:01 a.m.

California has a pretty efficient system set up to handle propane tanks used for barbecues. People buy a tank at full price, empty it cooking up great meals, then bring that tank back to one of thousands of retailers, where they can swap it out at half-price for one that's already been refilled by trained professionals.

That system keeps most BBQ propane tanks out of landfills, while reducing the number of tanks that need to be manufactured. It also brings the cost down for consumers, and it makes propane use safe and convenient for all parties.

But we have yet to set up a similarly effective system for the estimated 4 to 7 million one-pound propane cylinders that Californians use with camping stoves each year, or for the untold numbers of smaller isobutane canisters paired with backpacking stoves. Those tanks

often aren't re-used, and they often do become hazardous waste.

To date, efforts to stem the tide of single-use fuel canisters, both through legislation and by setting up reuse programs, have been a mixed bag. That's left it largely up to campers to track down sustainable solutions, such as reusable canisters, which can be filled or exchanged much like barbecue fuel tanks.

Turns out, finding such options can be tricky — but not impossible — in many pockets of Southern California.

Sustainable options hit or miss

The familiar forest green Coleman canisters, sold at just about every big box and outdoor store, aren't made to be refilled. That's where reusable models from companies such as Flame King and Little Kamper — with thicker walls, stronger welds and different nozzles — come in.

The website [RefuelYourFun.org](https://www.refuelyourfun.org), which is administered by the nonprofit California Product Stewardship Council with help from a state grant, lists retailers all over Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties who sell refillable camp stove fuel canisters. Southern California News Group randomly called a half-dozen retailers listed on the site, from REI in Santa Monica to Ace Hardware in Anaheim to U-Haul in Corona. None had reusable 1-pound propane canisters for sale.

REI was one of the first stores to offer reusable cylinders, noted Nate Pelczar, special projects manager with California Product Stewardship Council. But, like many retailers, he said REI encountered supply chain issues during the pandemic.

"I do know that they are actively working with refill suppliers to go down that path," Pelczar said. "I would expect to see some movement on that front in the very near future."

A map on Little Kamper's website shows 11 retailers in all of Southern California offering their reusable cylinders. There's just one such store listed in Riverside County, in Temecula, with many area residents or visiting campers dozens of miles or more from the nearest retailer. (Flame King, which is the other primary manufacturer of refillable 1-pound cylinders available in California, doesn't have an online map of its own retailers, instead directing customers to the RefuelYourFun.org map.)

If campers do find a place to snag a refillable cylinder, they can drive it back to one of those certified retailers and exchange it for a full one, as they might with larger barbecue fuel tanks. Or they can find a professional to refill the cylinder.

Breaking down the costs

Reusable camp stove canisters are, of course, more expensive up front, with single-use cylinders typically going for \$7 to \$9 (with 25 cents worth of gas inside), while refillable cylinders are often \$18 to \$20. But reusable versions are built to last a decade or more, and Pelczar noted they can be more cost effective after just a year or two, depending on how much people camp and cook.

Most U-Haul locations, for example, will refill any size of reusable propane canister for less than \$4 per gallon. When it comes to an exchange, Wanderers Outpost in San Clemente charges \$5 to swap out an empty Little Kamper cylinder for a full one, while at Sports Basement in Fountain Valley, members can exchange Flame King versions for no charge.

Thanks to work by the California Product Stewardship Council team, there also are some stores, such as Vagabond Welding Supply in Yucca Valley, that offer reusable 1-pound cylinders for free to area residents who sign a pledge to stop using single-use versions. And the nonprofit organizes special events in communities across the state to give refillable canisters away.

Long Beach hosted one such event at Veteran's Stadium in late June. Joy Contreras, with the city's Public Works department, said they handed out 216 reusable propane cylinders during the one-day event.

"Residents were excited and appreciative," she said. They also were impressed by how many times they can reuse the cylinders, Contreras said, noting they can be refilled "about 100 times."

Yosemite National Park has set up its own exchange and recycling program. There are bins throughout the park to collect single-use cylinders, while stores in the park sell and exchange refillable canisters.

Recycling falls short

Those single-use camp fuel canisters also can be recycled. If they're empty, Pelczar said it's legal for Californians to either toss them in the trash or the recycling bin. If they're not empty, they're supposed to be taken to a household hazardous waste facility, since any remaining flammable material can trigger fires that put waste haulers and those around them at risk.

"Unfortunately, empty or not, most of these cylinders are thrown into the trash, the recycling bin, or left at campsites," Pelczar said.

While his organization's data shows as many as 7.2 million single-use cylinders are sold in California each year, he said only about 1 million are collected and recycled through the Household Hazardous Waste programs offered by local governments.

Either way, he said the current system sticks all taxpayers and ratepayers with the tab, as cities, waste haulers, and state and national parks are stuck sorting and processing these cylinders. Data collected by the California Product Stewardship Council shows handling costs can range between \$3 and \$30 a cylinder, which can raise rates for trash customers and suck up funds that cities and parks could put to better use.

“A growing chorus of jurisdictions from across the state across the country are saying, ‘We can’t afford to deal with these anymore,’” Pelczar said.

“That’s not sustainable for us as consumers, for our communities or for the folks that have to pay for the proper disposal of these products.”

Legislation could help

With such effects in mind, the California legislature last year passed a bill from state Sen. Bob Wieckowski, D-Fremont, that would have banned single-use 1-pound propane canisters in the state. But when [Senate Bill 1256](#) made it to Gov. Gavin Newsom’s desk last fall, he vetoed it, directing lawmakers to instead focus on developing a stronger reuse and recycling program.

This year, a bill that would have done just that has been quietly shelved in the legislature.

Senate Bill 560 — crafted by the California Product Stewardship Council and introduced by State Sen. John Laird, D-Santa Cruz — calls for setting up a “producer stewardship program,” which would require companies that make these canisters to pay to set up convenient places for customers to either recycle or refill their camping and backpacking stove fuel cylinders.

Similar programs already exist for old paint, pharmaceutical products and used mattresses, and Pelczar said they’ve managed to make manufacturers “take ownership of the problems they’re creating and take ownership of the solutions.”

While SB 560 didn’t make it out of committee this year, Justin Tran, press secretary for Laird, said they’ve turned it into a two-year bill that will be revisited during the 2024 legislative session.

“The senator looks forward to working with all stakeholders during the legislative process to ensure its passage next year,” Tran said.

In the meantime, Pelczar encourages campers — who presumably care about protecting the nature they enjoy spending time in — to ask more retailers to start carrying reusable fuel canisters. They also can ask their community to host a giveaway, which the California Product Stewardship Council can facilitate using grants from CalRecycle. And they can go a bit out of their way, for now, to seek out more sustainable options.

“We just need folks to take action,” Pelczar said.

bstaggs@scng.com

Follow Brooke Staggs [@JurnoBrooke](#)