

Single-use propane cylinders may soon vanish in California. What to do

By **Russ and Tiña De Maris** September 10, 2022

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Probably none of us can imagine an RV campground built on top of a landfill. To that end, the push is always on for more recycling. Think about just one item—disposable one-pound propane cylinders. The little green guys you might stick on the bottom of a lantern, or use to fire your really portable gas grill. Each year, four million of them are sold in California alone. While a quarter are recycled, the rest—tossed in the trash. May not sound like much, but it amounts to about 2,200 garbage truck loads each year. It's a lot of hazardous trash, and the Golden State is on the cusp of banning the sale of single-use propane cylinders, come 2028. What alternatives are there?

Refillable cylinders the order of the day

California's SB 1256, already passed by both the Senate and the Assembly, is waiting for an expected signature from the governor. If approved, the law will ban the sale of the common, single-use LP cylinder popular among recreationists. No, the taller, skinnier cylinders commonly used for blowtorches will NOT be affected. But for those using the squat cylinders, life will not be the same. Refillable cylinders will become the order of the day.

Already, one company has positioned itself to benefit from the changeover. [Little Kamper](#), a California outfit, already has a refillable one-pound gas cylinder system, and retailers to move them out. Buy a new, refillable cylinder for about \$22, use it, then turn it back in for a refill. The refill will set you back about \$11. Compare this to the cost of a little more than \$5 each for a single-use cylinder, and you can imagine some not-so-happy campers contemplating the changes.

More than just a landfill headache



What's the big deal, some ask. After all, it's only a couple thousand garbage truck loads. The amount of space in landfills is truly a drop in the bucket. But there are other concerns. Each year, California's Yosemite National Park is left with tossed-out single-use cylinders. Last year, the park was "gifted" with 24,000 of them, according to a report in the San Francisco Chronicle. Those 24,000 were just the ones the park was aware of, which puts out special recycling containers to collect them. The ones that get tossed in a dumpster can cause real problems.

Back in 2016, a waste processing plant in Kent County, Michigan had a nasty experience. A single, one-pound propane cylinder went through a baler. It exploded, blasting a worker off the baler. The resulting fire and damage cost the county \$68,000. All from a single cylinder. Hence, the push for refillable cylinders. At \$22 a throw, it's expected far fewer of these containers will be tossed out.

Once you've paid for the initial refillable cylinder, you're still on the hook for the "exchange" price. \$11 a refill for a single pound of propane is pretty spendy. It would be the equivalent of paying more than \$200 to refill a small, 5-gallon RV cylinder. Even paying \$5 for a non-refillable one-pound cylinder is driving some folks to become "do-it-yourself" propane refillers. With clever plumbing methods, they hook up empty single-use cylinders to a 5-gallon LP container and refill the throw-away. It's NOT a wise thing to do.

Don't "do it yourself"!

Disposable propane cylinders are built far differently than their larger, refillable brothers. The metal walls of the disposable type are thin, and repeated contraction and expansion of those thin walls can lead to metal fatigue and eventual rupture. Likewise, a disposable's valve is not designed for repeated use. And unlike an LP cylinder designed to be refilled, there's no "bleeder" valve to indicate when the disposable is filled to the safe point, making overfilling a real problem. And while plenty of people refill their disposable cylinders without trouble, how much are you willing to gamble that you can get away with it?

While it is technically legal to refill a disposable cylinder, transporting it on a public highway is a very different matter. Federal regulations (administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation) prohibit transport of refilled "DOT 39" cylinders (of which classification small cylinders fall under). Violate that regulation, you're liable for a fine of up to \$500,000 and five years in prison.

Safely "do-it-yourself"



amazon.com

So what's to do? Buy a new "refillable" for \$22, then write off \$11 every time you empty it for an exchange? Here's another option: An outfit called Flame King [offers cylinders designed for refill, along with a refill kit to pump your own](#). The cylinders are heavy-duty and, unlike single-use cylinders, are equipped with an "80% valve" that indicates when the safe "full" point has been reached.

How does it work? The refill system includes a stand on which you can safely place an inverted 20-pound cylinder. That cylinder is connected to an adapter, and it to the refillable cylinder. Using an included Allen wrench, you crack open the bleeder valve and press a dispensing lever on the adapter. When liquid propane begins to spit out of the bleeder valve, you let up on the fill lever, close the bleeder valve, and disconnect the refilled cylinder. Users happily report that unlike refills of disposable cylinders, it's easy to get a full cylinder, with no need to stick it in a freezer to encourage a full-fill. There's a video available on YouTube that shows the whole process.

Will it do for you?

You'll need to run your figures to determine your break-even point. The whole kit, including the refill system and a single, one-pound refillable cylinder, runs \$45. Additional cylinders should be cheap—but Amazon lists them at a price higher than an empty with the entire refill system. But [fireanytime.com](#) says that those \$22 cylinders sold by Little Kamper are the same cylinders made by Flame King, with a Little Kamper label. You should be able to refill Little Kamper cylinders with the Flame King kit.

Yes, the up-front cost may look a little imposing, but on the other hand, if you're paying \$5 per single-use cylinder, it doesn't take much to figure the savings both financially and environmentally. And as opposed to the inherent dangers of refilling disposables, this Flame King system looks like a winner all around.

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