vinetur

German beverage partners launch an AI camera pilot to count empty returnable containers

The trial at Getränke Weidlich’s Dortmund site is set for July 2027, with inventory data intended for wider use in Germany’s returnables network

Wednesday, November 18, 2026



A German beverage industry association, a Fraunhofer research institute and one of the country’s largest brewing groups are joining forces on a pilot project that aims to use cameras and artificial intelligence to track stocks of empty returnable containers in the beverage wholesale trade.

The partnership, announced on Tuesday, November 17, brings together Pro Mehrweg, the Fraunhofer Institute for Material Flow and Logistics IML, and the Radeberger Group. The groups said they plan to test an automated system for recording empty-container inventories at Getränke Weidlich’s site in Dortmund as part of the EmpInVision funding project.

According to the announcement, the Dortmund location will be equipped with camera-based technology designed to identify and count empty returnable packaging automatically. The practical test is scheduled to begin in July 2027.

The stated goal is to use computer vision to capture inventories of empty returnable containers and make that information available to other participants in the reusable-packaging system. The partners said broader, cross-system access to empty-container data could help improve processes in the beverage returnables network.

In Germany’s beverage business, reusable bottles and crates move through a complex chain that includes brewers, soft drink makers, wholesalers and retailers. Tracking those assets accurately can be difficult when inventories are updated manually or shared unevenly. If the pilot works as intended, it could help reduce logistical inefficiencies and make it easier for beverage companies and wholesalers to know where needed packaging is available, an issue that can affect the supply of beer, water, soft drinks and other beverages sold in returnable formats.

The project is being funded by Germany’s Federal Ministry for Research, Technology and Space under the DATI pilot funding program and the MEHRCE support cluster, according to the statement. The announcement did not disclose the financial size of the project or provide technical details about how the system will process images, what types of returnable packaging it will recognize first, or how data will be shared among participating companies.

Fraunhofer IML is one of Germany’s best-known applied research institutes in logistics and material flow, and the Radeberger Group is a major force in the country’s brewing sector. Pro Mehrweg represents the interests of reusable packaging. Their cooperation signals a push to digitize a part of beverage logistics that is still labor-intensive in many operations.

The planned test at Getränke Weidlich in Dortmund will serve as the first real-world trial named in the announcement. The partners did not say how long the pilot will run after its start in July 2027 or when they expect to assess results. They also did not say whether the technology could later be expanded to other wholesale sites or integrated with existing inventory and warehouse systems.

Even so, the project points to a broader shift in the beverage industry toward using machine vision and AI in warehouse and logistics operations. In the returnables business, where packaging circulates continuously and shortages can disrupt deliveries, more precise inventory data could become a practical advantage if the technology proves reliable at scale.