

The real cost of bottled water

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Sunday, February 18, 2007

San Franciscans and other Bay Area residents enjoy some of the nation's highest quality drinking water, with pristine Sierra snowmelt from the Hetch Hetchy reservoir as our primary source. Every year, our water is tested more than 100,000 times to ensure that it meets or exceeds every standard for safe drinking water. And yet we still buy bottled water. Why?

Maybe it's because we think bottled water is cleaner and somehow better, but that's not true. The federal standards for tap water are higher than those for bottled water.

The Environmental Law Foundation has sued eight bottlers for using words such as "pure" to market water that contains bacteria, arsenic and chlorine. Bottled water is no bargain either: It costs 240 to 10,000 times more than tap water. For the price of one bottle of Evian, a San Franciscan can receive 1,000 gallons of tap water. Forty percent of bottled water should be labeled bottled tap water because that is exactly what it is. But even that doesn't dampen the demand.

Clearly, the popularity of bottled water is the result of huge marketing efforts. The global consumption of bottled water reached 41 billion gallons in 2004, up 57 percent in just five years. Even in areas where tap water is clean and safe to drink, such as in San Francisco, demand for bottled water is increasing -- producing unnecessary garbage and consuming vast quantities of energy. So what is the real cost of bottled water?

Most of the price of a bottle of water goes for its bottling, packaging, shipping, marketing, retailing and profit. Transporting bottled water by boat, truck and train involves burning massive quantities of fossil fuels. More than 5 trillion gallons of bottled water is shipped internationally each year. Here in San Francisco, we can buy water from Fiji (5,455 miles away) or Norway (5,194 miles away) and many other faraway places to satisfy our demand for the chic and exotic. These are truly the Hummers of our bottled-water generation. As further proof that the bottle is worth more than the water in it, starting in 2007, the state of California will give 5 cents for recycling a small water bottle and 10 cents for a large one.

Just supplying Americans with plastic water bottles for one year consumes more than 47 million gallons of oil, enough to take 100,000 cars off the road and 1 billion pounds of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, according to the Container

Recycling Institute. In contrast, San Francisco tap water is distributed through an existing zero-carbon infrastructure: plumbing and gravity. Our water generates clean energy on its way to our tap -- powering our streetcars, fire stations, the airport and schools.

More than 1 billion plastic water bottles end up in the California's trash each year, taking up valuable landfill space, leaking toxic additives, such as phthalates, into the groundwater and taking 1,000 years to biodegrade. That means bottled water may be harming our future water supply.

The rapid growth in the bottled water industry means that water extraction is concentrated in communities where bottling plants are located. This can have a huge strain on the surrounding eco-system. Near Mount Shasta, the world's largest food company, Nestle, is proposing to extract billions of gallons of spring water, which could have devastating impacts on the McCloud River.

So it is clear that bottled water directly adds to environmental degradation, global warming and a large amount of unnecessary waste and litter. All this for a product that is often inferior to San Francisco's tap water. Luckily, there are better, less expensive alternatives:

-- In the office, use a water dispenser that taps into tap water. The only difference your company will notice is that you're saving a lot of money.

-- At home and in your car, switch to a stainless steel water bottle and use it for the rest of your life knowing that you are drinking some of the nation's best water and making the planet a better place.

Take the pledge

Signing on to sfenvironment.org or sfwater.org to register not to buy bottled water for a year enters your name in a drawing to win a free stainless steel water bottle.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/18/EDG56N6OA41.DTL>

This article appeared on page E - 5 of the San Francisco Chronicle