

Plan B Updates

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Bottled Water Boycotts: Back-to-the-Tap Movement Gains Momentum

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From San Francisco to New York to Paris, city governments, high-class restaurants, schools, and religious groups are ditching bottled water in favor of what comes out of the faucet. With people no longer content to pay 1,000 times as much for bottled water, a product no better than water from the tap, a backlash against bottled water is growing.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors, which represents some 1,100 American cities, discussed at its June 2007 meeting the irony of purchasing bottled water for city employees and for city functions while at the same time touting the quality of municipal water. The group passed a resolution sponsored by Mayors Gavin Newsom of San Francisco, Rocky Anderson of Salt Lake City, and R. T. Rybak of Minneapolis that called for the examination of bottled water's environmental impact. The resolution noted that with \$43 billion a year going to provide clean drinking water in cities across the country, "the United States' municipal water systems are among the finest in the world."

While the Mayors Conference fell short of moving to stop taxpayer money from filling the coffers of water bottlers, a growing number of cities are heading in that direction. Los Angeles, which has restricted the purchase of bottled water with city funds since 1987, now has more company. By the end of 2007, purchasing bottled water will be off-limits for San Francisco's departments and agencies, saving a half-million dollars each year and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. St. Louis is poised to ban bottled water purchases for city employees in early 2008.

At the launch of Corporate Accountability International's "Think Outside the Bottle" campaign in October, Mayor Anderson of Salt Lake City described the "total absurdity and irresponsibility, both economic and environmental, of purchasing and using bottled water when we have perfectly good and safe municipal sources of tap water." He urged city government departments and restaurants to stop buying bottled water.

In November, the city council of Chicago, beleaguered by swelling landfills and a stretched budget, placed a landmark tax of 5¢ on every bottle of water sold in the city in order to discourage consumption. That same month, Illinois state agencies were banned from purchasing bottled water with government funds. With 86 percent of used water bottles in the United States ending up as garbage or litter instead of being recycled, switching from the bottle to the tap helps to alleviate the trash burden.

New York City is urging residents to drink tap water, which is naturally filtered in the protected Catskill forest region. In Kentucky, the Louisville water utility hands out free bottles for residents to fill with "Pure Tap." Dozens of other local governments are talking up tap water and are looking into banning the bottle. (See [list of other cities and initiatives](#).)

Tap water promotional campaigns would have seemed quaint a few decades ago, when water in bottles was a rarity. Now such endeavors are needed to counteract the pervasive marketing that has caused consumers to lose faith in the faucet. In fact, more than a quarter of bottled water is just processed tap water, including top-selling Aquafina and Coca-Cola's Dasani. When Pepsi announced in July that it would clearly label its Aquafina water as from a "public water source," it no doubt shocked everyone who believed that bottles with labels depicting pristine mountains or glaciers delivered a superior product.

Despite the less-frequent quality testing and sometimes commonplace origin of the product, bottled water consumption has soared. Annual consumption in the United States in 1976 was less than 2 gallons for every man, woman, and child; some 30 years later, Americans on average each now drink about 30 gallons of bottled water a year. (See [data](#).)

All this hydration costs Americans more than \$15 billion a year. The price of individual bottles of water ranges up to several dollars a gallon (and more for designer brands), while tap water is delivered directly to homes and offices for less than a penny a gallon. People complaining about \$3-a-gallon gasoline may start to wonder why they are paying even more per gallon for bottled water.

With sales growing by 10 percent each year, far faster than any other beverage, bottled water now appears to be the drink of choice for many Americans—they swallow more of it than milk, juice, beer, coffee, or tea. (See [data](#).) While some industry analysts are counting on bottled water to beat out carbonated soft drinks to top the charts in the near future, the burgeoning back-to-the-tap movement may reverse the trend.

In contrast to tap water, which is delivered through an energy-efficient infrastructure, bottled water is an incredibly wasteful product. It is usually packaged in single-serving plastic bottles made with fossil fuels. Just manufacturing the 29 billion plastic bottles used for water in the United States each year requires the equivalent of more than 17 million barrels of crude oil.

After being filled, the bottles may travel far. Nearly one quarter of bottled water crosses national borders before reaching consumers, and part of the cachet of certain bottled water brands is their remote origin. Adding in the Pacific Institute's estimates for the energy used for pumping and processing, transportation, and refrigeration, brings the annual fossil fuel footprint of bottled water consumption in the United States to over 50 million barrels of oil equivalent—enough to run 3 million cars for one year. If everyone drank as much bottled water as Americans do, the world would need the equivalent of more than 1 billion barrels of oil to produce close to 650 billion individual bottles.

Concerns about this high energy use and the associated contribution to climate change, along with worries about waste, are driving many groups back to tap water. The United Church of Canada is one of the religious groups abandoning bottled water for moral reasons. The Berkeley school district no longer offers bottled water. And after watching 3,000 empty bottles pile up each week, the Nashville law firm Bass, Berry, & Sims has stopped stocking bottled water.

Europeans have long led the world in per person consumption of bottled water. Italy tops the list worldwide, with Italians drinking 54 gallons per person in 2006. Italy is closely trailed in per capita consumption by the United Arab Emirates and Mexico, followed by France, Belgium, Germany, and Spain. (See [data](#).)

Yet even in Western Europe the bottle is starting to lose clout. Rome, a city of many historic fountains, is promoting its tap water. Florence's city council, schools, and other public offices offer only city water. In the United Kingdom, the Treasury and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have ceased offering bottled water at official functions. Bottled water sales in Scandinavia are projected to fall because of growing environmental concerns.

Even France, home to Evian, is seeing a sales slowdown. During a 2005 tap water promotion campaign in Paris, the water utility handed out refillable glass carafes. Now Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë serves only tap water at official events and encourages others to do the same. Total bottled water sales in France fell in 2004 and 2005, but rebounded in 2006.

Slowing sales may be the wave of the future as the bottle boycott movement picks up speed. With more than 1 billion people around the globe still lacking access to a safe and reliable source of water, the \$100 billion the world spends on bottled water every year could certainly be put to better use creating and maintaining safe public water infrastructure everywhere.

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