



## Is America's \$8 Billion Bottled Water Industry a Fraud

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Despite the Hype, Bottled Water is Neither Cleaner nor Greener than Tap Water**

**by Brian Howard**

"You drink tap water? Are you crazy?" asks a 21-year-old radio producer from the Chicago area. "I only drink bottled water." In a trendy nightclub in New York City, the bartender tells guests they can only be served bottled water, which costs \$5 for each tiny half-pint container. One outraged clubber is stopped by the restroom attendant as she tries to refill the bottle from the tap. "You can't do that," says the attendant. "New York's tap water isn't safe."

Whether a consumer is shopping in a supermarket or a health food store, working out in a fitness center, eating in a restaurant or grabbing some quick refreshment on the go, he or she will likely be tempted to buy bottled water. The product comes in an ever-growing variety of sizes and shapes, including one bottle that looks like a drop of water with a golden cap. Some fine hotels now offer the services of "water sommeliers" to advise diners on which water to drink with different courses.

A widening spectrum of bottled water types are crowding the market, including spring, mineral, purified, distilled, carbonated, oxygenated, caffeinated and vitamin-enriched, as well as flavors, such as lemon or strawberry, and specific brands aimed at children. Bottled water bars have sprung up in the hipper districts, from Paris to Los Angeles.

The message is clear: Bottled water is "good" water, as opposed to that nasty, unsafe stuff that comes out of the tap. But in most cases tap water adheres to stricter purity standards than bottled water, whose source < far from a mountain spring can be wells underneath industrial facilities. Indeed, 40 percent of bottled water began life as, well, tap water.

A 2001 World Wildlife Fund (WWF) study confirmed the widespread belief that consumers associate bottled water with social status and healthy living. Their perceptions trump their objectivity, because even some people who

claim to have switched to bottled water "for the taste" can't tell the difference: When Good Morning America conducted a taste test of its studio audience, New York City tap water was chosen as the heavy favorite over the oxygenated water O2, Poland Spring and Evian. Many of the "facts" that bottled water drinkers swear by are erroneous. Rachele Kuzma, a Rutgers student, says she drinks bottled water at school because "it's healthier" and "doesn't have fluoride," although much of it does have fluoride.

Bottled water is so ubiquitous that people can hardly ask for water anywhere without being handed a bottle. But what is the cost to society and the environment?

### **Largely Self-Regulated**

The bottled water industry has exploded in recent years, and enjoys annual sales of more than \$35 billion worldwide. In 2002, almost six billion gallons of bottled water were sold in the U.S., representing an increase of nearly 11 percent over 2001. Americans paid \$7.7 billion for bottled water in 2002, according to the consulting and research firm Beverage Marketing Corporation. Bottled water is the fastest-growing segment of the beverage industry, and the product is expected to pass both coffee and milk to become the second-most-consumed beverage (behind soft drinks) by 2004. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), "More than half of all Americans drink bottled water; about a third of the public consumes it regularly." While most people would argue that bottled water is healthier than convenient alternatives like sugared sodas or artificially flavored drinks, are the third of bottled water consumers who claim they are motivated by promises of purity (according to a 2000 survey) getting what they pay for?

While the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulates the quality of public water supplies, the agency has no authority over bottled water. Bottled water that crosses state lines is considered a food product and is overseen by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which does mandate that it be bottled in sanitary conditions using food-grade equipment. According to the influential International Bottled Water Association (IBWA), "By law, the FDA Standard of Quality for bottled water must be as stringent as the EPA's standards for public drinking water."

However, the FDA is allowed to interpret the EPA's regulations and apply them selectively to bottled water. As Senior Attorney Erik Olson of the NRDC explains, "Although the FDA has adopted some of the EPA's regulatory standards, it has decided not to adopt others and has not even ruled on some points after several years of inaction." In a 1999 report, the NRDC concludes that bottled water quality is probably not inferior to average tap water, but Olson (the report's principal author) says that gaps in the weak

regulatory framework may allow careless or unscrupulous bottlers to market substandard products. He says that may be of particular concern to those with compromised immune systems.

The IBWA urges consumers to trust bottled water in part because the FDA requires water sources to be "inspected, sampled, analyzed and approved." However, the NRDC argues that the FDA provides no specific requirements-such as proximity to industrial facilities, underground storage tanks or dumps-for bottled water sources. That's looser monitoring than occurs at the EPA, which requires more specific assessments of tap water sources. Olson says one brand of "spring water," which had a graphic of mountains and a lake on the label, was actually taken from a well in Massachusetts in the parking lot of an industrial facility. The well, which is no longer used for bottled water, was near hazardous waste and had experienced contamination by industrial chemicals.

According to Olson, the FDA has no official procedure for rejecting bottled water sources once they become contaminated. He also says a 1990 government audit revealed that 25 percent of water bottlers had no record of source approval. Further, in contrast to the EPA, which employs hundreds of staffers to protect the nation's tap water systems, the FDA doesn't have even one full-time regulator in charge of bottled water.

Scott Hooper of the Kansas Rural Water Association says that although municipal system managers have to pay a certified lab to test samples weekly, monthly and quarterly for a long list of contaminants, water bottlers can use any lab they choose to perform tests as infrequently as once a year. Unlike utilities, which must publish their lab results in a public record, bottlers don't have to notify anyone of their findings, including consumers who inquire. The FDA has the authority to ask for a company's data, although test results can be destroyed after two years.

Olson adds, "Unlike tap water violations, which are directly enforceable, if a company exceeds bottled water standards, it is not necessarily a violation-they can just say so on the label, and may be insulated from enforcement." Further, while EPA rules specify that no confirmed E. coli or fecal coliform (bacteria that indicate possible contamination by fecal matter) contamination is allowed in tap water, the FDA merely set a minimum level for E. coli and fecal coliform presence in bottled water. Tap water from a surface source must be tested for cryptosporidium, giardia and viruses, unlike bottled water, and must also be disinfected, unlike bottled water. Hooper also notes that food products such as "carbonated water," "soda water" and "seltzer water"-in addition to most flavored waters-are held to even looser standards than "true" bottled water.

The EPA concludes, "Some bottled water is treated more than tap water, while



















