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# Bottled Water Myth Versus Reality

## THE STORY OF BOTTLED WATER

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prepared by The Story of Stuff Project

As *The Story of Bottled Water* points out, the bottled water industry manufactures consumer demand for bottled water through the promotion of a variety of myths. This fact sheet takes a closer look at these myths, and the realities that they obscure.

**Myth:** Bottled water tastes better than tap water.

**Reality:** In taste test after taste test, people can't tell the difference. Corporate Accountability International's "Think Outside the Bottle" campaign has held countless taste tests comparing bottled water to tap water, as have many media outlets, from *The New York Times* to Cleveland's local TV news channel. The results generally favor the

tap. Ultimately, however, the point isn't whether one tastes better than the other—its how our tastes are shaped by advertising, rather than by what's good for us. Between 10 and 15 percent of the price of a bottle of water goes to cover advertising costs.<sup>1</sup> We not only buy their myths, it turns out we pay extra for them.



**Myth:** Bottled water is safer than tap water.

**Reality:** In the US, tap water is regulated by the EPA,<sup>2</sup> while bottled water is regulated by the FDA. Unlike the FDA,<sup>3</sup> which has no reporting requirements, EPA requires your local utility to provide an Annual Water Quality Report, also called a Consumer Confidence Report, which must show any violations of drinking water quality standards. Local health departments also often provide testing services or have lists of accredited labs that do water testing.

Yes, some cities' water supplies are not at their best. (Environmental Working Group's database can tell you if your city is on the list of less-than-optimal water supplies.) But even in these places the long-term solution is not to buy bottled water – but to make the tap water safe to drink.

**Myth:** But tap water is still susceptible to germs, as well as pernicious chemical agents.

**Reality:** For those who are still concerned about local water quality, or about chlorine, which is required to ensure germ-free public water, relatively low-cost household filters are available that can remove virtually any contaminant. Reverse osmosis and distillation

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filters can remove fluoride, which concerns some people. Using a household filter is cheaper and more secure than relying on bottled water.

**Myth:** Bottled water is convenient.

**Reality:** What is more convenient than nearly-free water running from your kitchen tap, and from public sources in schools, parks, offices, and sports stadiums? Sadly, we have come to confuse “disposability” with convenience; but there is nothing convenient about shipping water thousands of miles from its source, or all the waste and other costs associated with needless production and disposal of plastics. More convenient than buying bottled water is buying a reusable bottle and filling it from public sources. The leading organizations that promote reusable bottles recommend stainless steel or lined aluminum as sturdiest and safest.

**Myth:** Plastic bottles are recyclable, and are being made with thinner plastics, making them increasingly “green.”

**Reality:** Some 4 billion PET bottles end up in the U.S. waste stream each year, costing cities some \$70 million in cleanup and landfill costs.<sup>4</sup> A plastic water bottle can take up to 1000 years to degrade in a landfill;<sup>5</sup> when plastic is burned in incinerators, it releases dioxins, some of the most harmful manmade chemicals that exist. And most recycling is actually downcycling: making lower quality products than the originals, and requiring the addition of virgin plastics and toxic chemicals in the process.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing green about that.



**Myth:** Still, bottled water *is* green. I mean, *it's got to be*, it's water...

**Reality:** It takes about three liters of water and approximately 3.4 megajoules of energy to produce and sell a single liter of water in a plastic bottle.<sup>7</sup> The 31.2 billion liters of bottled water consumed annually in the United States require more than 17 million barrels of oil to produce.<sup>8</sup> According to the Container Recycling Institute, in the U.S. an estimated 144 billion containers were wasted in 2005.<sup>9</sup> While recycling the bottles offers moderate environmental benefits, drinking tap water has a MUCH lower carbon footprint than drinking bottled water.<sup>10</sup> That makes drinking tap water one of the best, and easiest, things we can do to reduce global warming.

**Myth:** Public water systems are inefficient and wasteful.

**Reality:** When the rubber hits the road, it is government spending on public works that has always bailed our economy out during fiscal crises. As part of the recent Stimulus Package, for example, the Senate appropriated \$6.4 billion for clean drinking water projects<sup>11</sup> – because these projects create jobs and long-term benefits. At the same

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time, public sector workers are a priceless resource, holding important knowledge and skills for efficient, effective water management. The answer to complaints that public agencies are not efficient enough is not to underfund and eliminate them, but to improve them. We should be investing more in public services, and investing more power in ordinary citizens to regulate them...not less.

**Myth:** The bottled water industry is merely meeting consumer demand.

**Reality:** It is not *meeting* consumer demand – it is *creating* it. Let's repeat: Between 10 and 15 percent of the price of a bottle of water goes to advertising costs. Effective marketing of bottled water has contributed to undermining confidence – and investment – in public tap water and encouraging underfunding of public agencies.

**Myth:** Okay, but still...public water fountains are kind of gross.

**Reality:** With enough water pressure and proper design, lips don't touch the spigot. And even if they do, municipal water supplies are chlorinated to kill bacteria. Just let some water run out before drinking, put that water in a reusable bottle, and you've got convenience that can't be beat.

**Myth:** Putting a price on water makes people value it more, and thus conserve it.

**Reality:** Bottled water is, by and large, an unnecessary product that encourages wasteful consumption – and it takes water, a public good and a common need – and submits it to the whims of the market. Price is not equivalent to value, and some resources, in order to be valued properly, must be regulated outside of the market. In the U.S. there are many examples, such as libraries, public schools, parks, highways, and public hospitals. Water is not a commodity to be bought and sold for profit – it is a human need, and must be regulated as such.

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1. Ferrier, Catherine, "Bottled Water: Understanding a Social Phenomenon," World Wildlife Fund, April 2001, 18.
  2. See <http://www.epa.gov/OGWDW/sdwa/>
  3. See <http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm046894.htm>
  4. <http://www.productpolicy.org/>
  5. <http://www.container-recycling.org/>
  6. See McDonough and Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (2002).
  7. <http://www.container-recycling.org/media/newsarticles/plastic/2009/1-22-BottledWaterCreates.htm>
  8. <http://www.container-recycling.org/media/newsarticles/plastic/2009/1-22-BottledWaterCreates.htm>
  9. See Container Recycling Institute, *Water, Water Everywhere*, February 2007.
  10. See "Life Cycle Assessment of Drinking Water Delivery Systems: Bottled Water, Tap Water and Home/Office Delivery Water," Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, <http://www.deq.state.or.us/lq/sw/wasteprevention/drinkingwater.htm>
  11. [http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2009-02-12-stimulus-plan-breakdown\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2009-02-12-stimulus-plan-breakdown_N.htm)