



Bottling Our Cities' Tap Water

Share of Bottled Water from Municipal Supplies Up 50 Percent



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Industry data shows that over the past decade, an increasing share of the bottled water sold in the United States is coming from municipal water supplies. Categorized as “purified” by the bottled water industry, bottling companies purchase municipal tap water, put it through a filtration process, bottle it and then sell it back to consumers for hundreds to thousands of times the cost. Between 2000 and 2009, the share of water bottled with polyethylene terephthalate (PET) sold in retail stores sourced by tap water supplies increased by almost 50 percent. During that time, tap water went from making up a third of retail PET bottled water sold in retail stores (32.7 percent) to making up almost half (47.8 percent) of it.

Between 2005 and 2009, the volume of tap water bottled grew by 66 percent while the volume of spring water bottled increased by only 9 percent. Tap water bottling expanded at more than seven times the rate of spring water bottling.

Although the volume of bottled water sold in 2008 and 2009 declined, the industry has experienced tremendous growth over the past decade. Data shows that the volume of tap water bottled increased at a greater rate than the volume of spring water bottled, particularly since 2005:

- The volume of tap water bottled in PET plastic for sale in retail stores increased by 453 percent from 449.3 million gallons in 2000 to 2.5 billion gallons in 2009. Over that same time, the volume of spring water bottled grew by 194 percent from 922.8 mil-

lion gallons in 2000 to 2.7 billion gallons in 2009. Although both sources of bottled water experienced dramatic growth, the amount of tap water bottled increased at almost twice (1.89 times) the rate of spring water between 2000 and 2009.

- The rapid increase in the bottling of tap water occurred in the latter part of the decade. Between 2005 and 2009, the volume of tap water bottled grew by 66 percent while the volume of spring water bottled increased by only 9 percent. Tap water bottling expanded at more than seven times the rate of spring water bottling.¹

Why Is This Trend Occurring?

Bottling companies are finding it easier to access municipal water than spring water or groundwater supplies. Companies have faced resistance from communities over getting approval to extract large quantities of spring water or groundwater for bottling. Companies are finding it easier to broker deals with city officials who often have an excess supply of water allocated to account for future growth or for times of drought.

The economic decline is also contributing to this trend. Elected officials can address their budgetary shortfalls by selling off this excess water to bottling companies. Furthermore, once cities agree to provide tap water for bottling, companies often decide to build a water bottling plant, which they promise will create jobs and increase tax revenue, further addressing the economic problems facing municipalities across the country.

The Beverage Marketing Corporation's *Bottled Water in the United States* report also attributes part of the increase in tap water being bottled to Nestlé Pure Life's switch from spring water to tap water in 2005.² Since 2004, Nestlé Pure Life's sales have increased by 320 percent.³ Nestlé Waters North America put most of its advertising eggs in the Nestlé Pure Life basket, as the company increased expenditures on advertising for Nestlé Pure Life by 3,000 percent from \$309,000 in 2004 to \$9.7 million in 2009. Between 2004 and 2009, Nestlé Waters North America spent more than twice as much on advertising for Nestlé Pure Life than its leading spring water bottled water brand, Poland Spring.⁴ Although Poland Spring continues to sell slightly more water than Nestlé Pure Life, its sales declined by 6.4 percent in 2009, while Nestlé Pure Life's sales increased sales by 18 percent. Nestlé Pure Life's growth is notable, as the bottled water industry sales as a whole declined by 5.2 percent in 2009.⁵ In 2009, the \$9.7 million in advertising for Nestlé Pure Life was more than three times the second-ranking brand of bottled water.⁶

Case Studies

The following examples from cities across the country illustrate this larger trend on the local level, and why bottling municipal tap water is an appealing option for Nestlé, which often meets local resistance to efforts to bottle spring water.

Sacramento, California

A perfect example of Nestlé's move to bottle tap water instead of spring water occurred in California. In July 2009, Sacramento mayor Kevin Johnson announced that Nestlé Waters North America would be opening a new bottling facility in Sacramento, which would use 30 million gallons of the city's water for bottling, along with about 18.9 million gallons of spring water from nearby sources.⁷ The company planned to filter the tap water and sell it under their Nestlé Pure Life brand. Two months after this announcement, Nestlé decided to withdraw its proposal to build a bottling plant in McCloud, California, just north of San Francisco, where it had planned to bottle 500 million gallons of spring water a year.⁸ This decision came after six years of resistance by the residents of McCloud to the Nestlé proposal due to concerns about the effects on local ecosystems, long-term water supplies and the quality of life in the rural area.





Save Our Water Sacramento is a community group that formed to oppose this facility. According to their accounts, “Nestlé and the City of Sacramento worked hard to quietly fast track this project.”⁹ The plant was scheduled to open in early 2010.¹⁰

Kennebunk, Maine

In the summer of 2008, the trustees of the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Wells Water District (KKWWD) in Maine voted down a proposal from Poland Spring, a subsidiary of Nestlé Waters North America. Poland Spring wanted to withdraw up to 432,000 gallons of water a day from the local water district. When the public became aware of the proposed agreement, citizens organized a grassroots group called Save Our Water. They rallied to stand in the way of large withdrawals of their public water resource. Part of their mission statement is to “fight for local democratic control of water resources.”²⁰ The public outcry swayed the KKWWD to table the proposed contract indefinitely. To further reduce public concern, the board voted on May 27, 2009 to permanently remove the contract from consideration.

Conclusion

The trend of water bottlers increasingly turning to tap water sources for bottling threatens our public water resources and is a bad deal for consumers who pay hundreds to thousands of times more for a product they can get from the tap. Furthermore, water bottlers are increasingly using aging water treatment systems that are funded by taxpayer dollars — another raw deal for citizens.

Endnotes

- 1 FWW analysis of Beverage Marketing Corporation Report: Bottled Water in the U.S. July 2010.
- 2 Beverage Marketing Corporation. “Bottled Water in the U.S.” July 2010 at 254.
- 3 Beverage Marketing Corporation. “Bottled Water in the U.S.” July 2010 at 229.
- 4 Beverage Marketing Corporation. “Bottled Water in the U.S.” July 2010 at 270.
- 5 Beverage Marketing Corporation. “Bottled Water in the U.S.” July 2010 at 227-228.
- 6 Beverage Marketing Corporation. “Bottled Water in the U.S.” July 2010 at 270.
- 7 Nestlé Waters North America in Sacramento: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions. Available at: <http://www.nestlewatersca.com/sacramento/faq.html>.
- 8 Nestle pulls plug on controversial bottling plant. San Jose Mercury News Online. September 10, 2009; Young, Samantha. “Nestle to Scale Back California Water Plant.” Manufacturing.net. May 13, 2008.
- 9 Save Our Water Sacramento. www.saveourwatersacramento.org.
- 10 Nestlé Waters North America in Sacramento: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions. Available at: <http://www.nestlewatersca.com/sacramento/faq.html>.
- 11 Barnett, Cynthia. “Niagara Bottling’s Fall.” FloridaTrend.com. March 2008.
- 12 Comas, Martin E. “500 rally in Groveland to pull plug on water bottler.” OrlandoSentinel.com. April 5, 2009.
- 13 Hudak, Stephen. “Lake drops litigation against Niagara Bottling.” OrlandoSentinel.com. March 3, 2009.
- 14 Barnett, Cynthia. “Niagara Bottling’s Fall.” FloridaTrend.com. March 2008.
- 15 Batchelor, Dic. “Ensure public input in water permitting. Gov. Crist.” OrlandoSentinel.com. October 11, 2009.
- 16 Polaris Institute. “Southern Exposure: Private Canadian Bottled Water Company Moves South.”
- 17 Vermont Natural Resources Council. “Protecting Groundwater: The Case for Filling a Gap in Vermont Water Law.” December 2007 at pg. 1.
- 18 Claremont, New Hampshire. City of Claremont Planning Board meeting minutes. October 2007.
- 19 Claremont, New Hampshire. City of Claremont Planning Board meeting minutes. October 2007.
- 20 www.soh20.org on July 20 2010.
- 21 Dolce, Laura. “Water District board votes to flush Nestle contract.” SeacoastOnline.com. June 4, 2009.

About Food & Water Watch: Food & Water Watch is a nonprofit consumer organization that works to ensure clean water and safe food. Food & Water Watch works with grassroots organizations around the world to create an economically and environmentally viable future. Through research, public and policymaker education, media and lobbying, we advocate policies that guarantee safe, wholesome food produced in a humane and sustainable manner, and public, rather than private, control of water resources including oceans, rivers and groundwater.

