



Marion County
Soil & Water Conservation District
“helping people care for the land”

News for Immediate Release

contact: Ron Lauster
phone: 317-786-1776
email: ron-lauster@iaswcd.org
web: www.marionswcd.org

Is Bottled Water Good or Bad for the Environment?

Ron Lauster, Director of the Marion County Soil and Water Conservation District says, “It is always good once in a while to consider issues from some possible different perspectives. Bottled water might be a topic to discuss in this regard.” A recent report states that global consumption of bottled water has doubled between 1997 and 2005. Consumers in industrial countries choose to drink bottled water for taste and convenience, while in developing countries, unreliable and unsafe municipal water supplies have driven the growth in consumption. Many poorer people who seek improved drinking water supplies cannot afford the bottled version. In 2005, sales in the United States alone generated more than \$10 billion in revenue.

According to a recent report from the Worldwatch Institute, this trend is problematic for the environment for two reasons. First, the increased withdrawal of natural mineral and spring water threatens many local streams and groundwater. Second, millions of tons of oil-derived plastics—primarily polyethylene terephthalate (PET)—are used to make the water bottles. About 2 million tons of PET bottles end up in landfills in the United States every year. In 2005, the US recycling rate for PET bottles was about 23%. The United States remains the largest consumer of bottled water, but among the top ten countries, India has nearly tripled its consumption, while China has more than doubled its consumption between 2000 and 2005.

In industrial countries with highly regulated water supplies, tap water has been proven to be just as safe, or safer, than its commercial counterpart. In the United States, regulations concerning bottled water are generally the same as for tap water, but are weaker for some microbial contaminants. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which regulates bottled water at the federal level, permits the product to contain certain levels of fecal matter, whereas the Environmental Protection Agency does not allow any human waste in city tap water. Bottled water violations are not always reported to the public, and in most cases the products may be recalled up to 15 months after the problematic water was produced, distributed, and sold. For more information about their report visit the Worldwatch Institute web site at: www.worldwatch.org/node/5063/print

Closer to home, here in the United States thirsty San Francisco city workers will no longer have bottled water to drink under an order by Mayor Gavin Newsom, who says it costs too much, worsens pollution and is no better than tap water. Newsom's executive order bars city departments, agencies and contractors from using city funds to serve water in plastic bottles and in larger dispensers when tap water is available. According to the Mayor Newsom, “In San Francisco, for the price of one 1 gallon (3.8 liters) of bottled water, local residents can purchase 1,000 gallons (38,000 liters) of tap water”. Newsom estimates San Francisco could save \$500,000 a year under his directive, which also addresses environmental concerns over the amount of oil used to make and transport plastic water bottles. “All of this waste and pollution is generated by a product that by objective standards is often inferior to the quality of San Francisco's pristine tap water” according to the Mayor. The ban on the ubiquitous plastic bottles follows a prohibition in March by city officials on plastic shopping bags in large supermarkets because recycling efforts had largely failed.

So Lauster asks, “What are your thoughts on bottled water?”

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