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Bottled Water Flim-flam

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The \$7.7 billion market for bottled water in the United States is fueled by the belief that it is safer and healthier than tap water. A recent study by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) demonstrates that frequently the opposite is true.

After testing more than 1000 bottles of water from 103 different companies, the NRDC uncovered microbial content in excess of state guidelines in one-third of the brands it sampled. The NRDC also discovered synthetic organic chemicals in one-fifth of its samples, usually at levels below state and federal limits. While tap water is not exempt from contamination, EPA guidelines do call for near constant testing of tap water quality. Bottling facilities are required to test less frequently and if they find pathogens like E. coli or fecal coliform they can still sell their water with a small disclaimer on the label.

While tap water is subject to extensive regulation and testing by the EPA, the agency does not oversee the bottled water industry. That task falls to the Food and Drug Administration, but only if the water crosses state lines. The FDA has adopted only some of the EPA's water standards and has the equivalent of less than one full-time staff person dedicated to developing and issuing bottled water rules. The 60 to 70 percent of bottled water brands that are produced and sold within one state are subject solely to state regulations and only 7 states effectively monitor bottled water.

The plastic used to package the 6 billion gallons of bottled water sold in the U.S. in 2002 amounts to 1.5 million tons of plastic. Once produced, plastic water bottles clog landfills and litter the landscape, and toxins in the plastic can leach into ground water. Nine out of 10 plastic water bottles end up as garbage or litter. That's 30 million discarded bottles a day.

Extracting the quantities of water necessary to fill that many bottles has sizeable environmental repercussions. In Mecosta County, Michigan, for example, Ice Mountain, a subsidiary of Nestle Waters North America, pumps more than a half million gallons of water per day from local springs. For the right to drain central Michigan's waters, Ice Mountain paid a \$100 licensing fee and garnered millions of dollars in tax credits from the state. Residents of Mecosta County have organized a boycott of Ice Mountain and Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation has taken the company to court, arguing that the massive pumping enterprise does not constitute a "reasonable use" of the state's water.

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