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News

Bottled water no better than the tap?



A corporate watchdog organization kicked off a campaign against bottled water at PSU last week. Studies show that in many instances bottled water may be no safer than tap water. Photo by Chad Long.

National organization plans to hold tap and bottled water 'taste tests' at Portland State

By Monica Garcia
March 14, 2006

When faced with the choice of filling up for free at the tap or drinking fountain, how many students opt daily to pay over \$1 for a chilled and portable bottle of water instead? Many people believe that in choosing the bottle over the tap, they are assured of a safer and cleaner product, but the local organizers of Corporate Accountability International are gearing up to challenge the idea that the bottle is better.

The local chapter of Corporate Accountability International, a national non-profit organization, is launching a campaign against the bottled water industry this month and plans to hold at least one event at Portland State.

According to the group's web site, they are targeting the bottled water industry because of deceptive marketing techniques that have led consumers to believe that bottled water is safer and cleaner than tap water. The group further asserts that the bottled water industry is helping to create a global water crisis by turning a basic human right into a commodity.

According to a Jan. 2003 study done by Consumer Reports, Food and Drug Administration regulations for bottled water are similar but in some cases less stringent than those of the Environmental Protection Agency, the organization that sets requirements for municipal water systems.

Tests conducted by Consumer Reports researchers found that some bottled water would not meet current standards for arsenic. They also concluded that certain types of plastic packaging left behind traces of bis-phenol A, a compound that has been shown to alter brain chemistry and insulin production in laboratory animals.

Although most of the bottled water tested by Consumer Reports passed both the EPA and FDA regulations, experts argue that tap water provides an equally healthy and nearly cost-free alternative.

"The bigger issue is that they [the bottled water industry] prey on people's sensitivities, by selling a product that is either free or extremely cheap in most areas of the U.S.," said Peter Lavigne, an associate professor from Portland State's Public Administration Department. Lavigne specializes in the study of water policy and watershed management.

Mary Nicol, field organizer for Corporate Accountability International, spoke at a kick-off meeting on March 2 in the Smith Memorial Center. She informed the audience that at least a quarter of all bottled water is nothing more than bottled tap water (a statistic that Consumer Reports also cites). Her organization hopes to raise awareness about deceptive marketing practices of the bottled water industry and to recruit PSU students for the grassroots campaign.

Corporate Accountability plans to attack the water industry through community outreach and applying direct pressure to corporations. "What we are asking the corporations to do is to stop interfering with local policies and stop misleading marketing that bottled water is safer and cleaner," Nicol said. The group also hopes to organize tap water challenges where citizens will be asked to distinguish between tap and bottled water by taste alone.

Both Nicol and Lavigne acknowledge that the citizens of Portland are fortunate to have access to particularly clean municipal water. "There are no safety issues in Bull Run water," Lavigne said. "It may be the best municipal water supply in the world."

According to Nicol and Lavigne, there are instances when tap water may not be the safest bet. "There are a lot of rural areas where water sources get pesticides in it. If my well water was testing for pesticides, I wouldn't want to be drinking it," Lavigne said.

Nicol acknowledged that in the wake of hurricane Katrina, bottled water was a temporary solution to the need for clean water. "It's a band-aid solution," she said, adding that her organization feels that, "resources should be directed to local water systems."

The real issue, according to Nicol is that people everywhere deserve access to clean water. Corporations such as Coke, Pepsi and Nestle who market bottled water as a cleaner, safer alternative to municipal water are undermining the public's faith in its local water supply.

Corporate Accountability believes that the bottom line for bottled water sellers is profit. Nicol summed up the argument with a question, "Who do you want controlling your water? People from your local community or folks who want to turn a profit?"

Corporate Accountability plans to conduct its tap water challenge on March 21 in the Park Blocks at PSU. Students interested in helping with the campaign can e-mail Mary Nicol at mary@greencorps.org.