

# TAKE BACK THE TAP

## Kicking the Bottled Water Habit

BY CORIE LOPEZ

**B**ottled water is bad. It's bad for San Diego and the entire planet. Extracting, bottling and transporting water diminishes groundwater, harms the environment, hogs energy and rips off consumers. Add in the pollution from the manufacture of billions of plastic bottles, and we've got a real ecological mess.

"Bottled water is kind of like selling ice cubes" to people in the Arctic, says Scott A. Murray, a San Diego-area organic farmer and president of the local chapter of Slow Food USA. "Most Americans don't know about the gift they have with water being piped into their homes. In fact, I recently had a visitor from Panama who, when offered bottled water, declined it and asked for piped water. He said, 'Where I come from, pipe water is just a dream, so I try to enjoy it every chance I get.'"

As an organic farmer in the water-stressed environs of Southern California, Murray understands very well the pivotal role this liquid life plays in growing food. In line with that, he's aware of some of the pitfalls of bottled water, especially how extracting water for bottling can decrease the flow and level of a region's springs, wetlands, lakes, streams and rivers. That in turn can affect businesses and people, including Murray.

It would be unfair for him—or any farmer, for that matter—to improve soil's water absorbency and health if, up the road, some corporation were to set about mining the groundwater to bottle and sell. That could complicate the job of providing local food. What's more, a community's residents could get less of the water they need.

Although he understood a fair amount about the bane of bottled water, Murray learned more from *Take Back the Tap*, an ongoing campaign of Washington, D.C.-based Food & Water Watch. Dedicated to challenging corporate control over our food, fish and water resources, the nonprofit organization has used *Take Back the Tap* to persuade consumers, restaurateurs, mayors, businesses, and, well, everyone under the sun to kick the bottled water habit and, instead, turn to tap water.

The bad news about bottled water is substantial and sobering. First of all, it's a rip-off. In 2006, U.S. consumers wasted nearly \$10 billion on close to 8 billion gallons of nonsparkling bottled water; almost 5 billion of those gallons were in single-serve PET plastic bottles. On a per gallon basis, bottled water costs from 89 cents to \$8.26, far more than the \$0.002 per gallon cost for clean, healthful tap water.

Perhaps consumers have fallen for the marketing myth that water in a bottle is somehow safer or better than tap water.

It's not. U.S. tap water is just as safe as bottled water and, in many cases, more so. The federal government requires far more rigorous and frequent safety monitoring of municipal drinking water than bottled water. Independent testing has found a wide range of heavy metal, microbial and chemical pollutants in bottled water.

Tap water is more strictly regulated than bottled water. The Environmental Protection Agency requires that municipal water be tested hundreds of times a month. Water systems are required by law to make their testing results available to the public. EPA also mandates that surface sources of tap water be tested for cryptosporidium and, if it's found, that the water be disinfected. More than 90 percent of communities met EPA standards this year. For citizens in communities that don't meet standards, installing a filter at home is the best option.

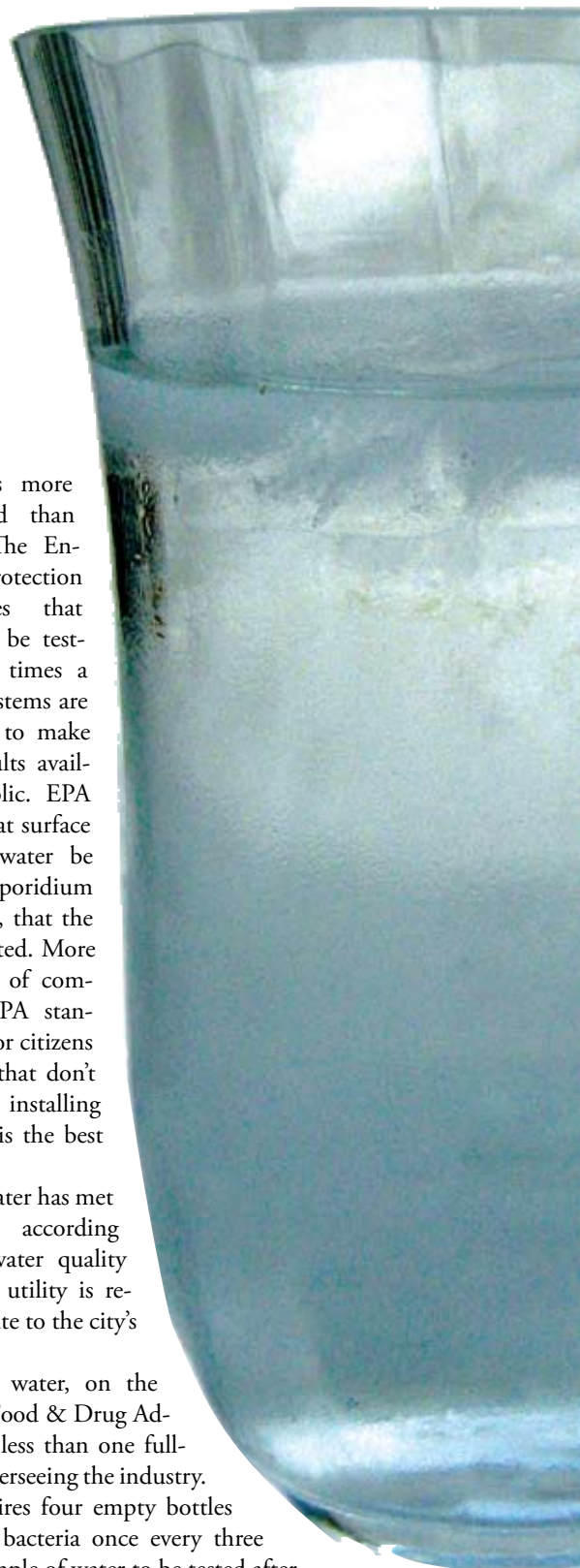
San Diego's water has met EPA standards, according to the annual water quality reports the local utility is required to distribute to the city's water users.

With bottled water, on the other hand, the Food & Drug Administration has less than one full-time employee overseeing the industry. The agency requires four empty bottles to be tested for bacteria once every three months and a sample of water to be tested after filtration and before bottling once a week. Bottled water is never tested after bottling and storage, and it is never tested for the chemicals that can leech from the plastic bottle into the water.

And even if FDA wanted to regulate bottled water more stringently, its hands are tied. The agency oversees *only* interstate sales of bottled water, which are less than half—30 percent to 40 percent—of all bottled water produced in the United States.

The bottled water record is the model of economic inefficiency and environmental damage from beginning to end.

Producing a 20-ounce bottle of water can require as much as 60



Photographs: Helen Kravchenhoff

ounces of water. Annual U.S. plastic bottle production requires more than 17 million barrels of oil, enough to fuel one million vehicles on our roads each year. But that's just to make the bottles. The energy used to pump, process, transport and refrigerate bottled water amounts to 50 million barrels of oil, enough to run 3 million cars.

What are the larger implications of using and burning all that energy? For one thing, bottling water produces more than 2.5 million tons of carbon dioxide annually. And that contributes to the ongoing crisis of global climate change.

Unfortunately, the bad news doesn't stop after the last drop is drained from the bottle. About 86 percent of the empty plastic water bottles in the United States land in the garbage instead of being recycled. That amounts to about 2 million tons of PET plastic bottles piling up in U.S. landfills each year.

However, we don't have to be stuck with bottled water. U.S. tap water is clean, healthful and safe. Of course, improvements always are possible. Murray agrees with Food & Water Watch that better enforcement of the Clean Water Act and other federal and state laws and regulations are needed to protect our source water from pollution. Further, Congress should pass a federal trust fund to provide billions of dollars over the coming decades to repair, rejuvenate and refine America's drinking water and wastewater systems.

Considering that litany of bad bottled water news, Scott A. Murray thinks it's high time that consumers in San Diego and across the nation give up on water packed in plastic and, instead, *Take Back the Tap*.

To learn more about the work of Food & Water Watch on bottled water, visit [www.foodandwaterwatch.org](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org).

*Corie Lopez is a San Diego-based organizer for Food & Water Watch. You can reach her at [clopez@fiwwatch.org](mailto:clopez@fiwwatch.org).*



## Take Back the Tap!



**Give bottled water the boot!**  
Tap water is greener, cheaper and just as safe as bottled water. We've got tools to help you make the switch at [www.takebackthetap.org](http://www.takebackthetap.org)



## TRANSCENDENT

Taste and health – living in perfect harmony. Explore the flavorful mysteries and versatility of the many colorful varieties of USA Pears.

The path to enlightenment starts at your local grocer.

[www.usapears.org/divine](http://www.usapears.org/divine)

