

## Environment: Bottled-Water Industry Fights Back

The bottled-water industry has taken a knock over claims that its product is bad for the environment. Now it's fighting back.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Dan McGinn

**Newsweek**

Updated: 10:45 a.m. PT Aug 2, 2007

Aug. 2, 2007 - It's been a tough summer for the bottled-water industry. In June, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, led by San Francisco's Gavin Newsom, passed a resolution calling for a study of the negative environmental impact of bottled water and praising the high quality of municipal tap water. In July, under pressure from environmental activists, Pepsico announced it would begin adding "source labels" to bottles of Aquafina, making it clearer to consumers that the stuff inside is merely tap water that's been subjected to extra purification. And in the July issue of Fast Company magazine, award-winning writer Charles Fishman penned a highly critical story about Americans' \$16 billion-a-year bottled-water habit, which he calls an "indulgence" in a world in which 1 billion people lack access to dependable water sources. "When a whole industry grows up around supplying us with something we don't need—when a whole industry is built on the packaging and the presentation—it's worth asking how that happened, and what the impact is," Fishman writes.

Now the bottled-water industry is fighting back. On Friday, NEWSWEEK has learned, The New York Times and the San Francisco Chronicle will each carry a full-page ad containing a message from the International Bottled Water Association. This week's campaign will be the first industrywide advertising since 1999. In the ads, the industry pushes the notion that "calorie-free, refreshing water" is a healthy choice in a country where diabetes, obesity and heart disease afflict so many people. But beyond touting those healthy virtues, the ad also seeks to subtly reframe the debate. "Whether it comes from a faucet or a bottle, drinking water is an easy step people can take to lead a healthier lifestyle," the ad says.

Much of this message is not new: the industry has spent years promoting the notion that Americans are better off drinking bottled water than soda or beer, and from a health standpoint, it's hard to argue with them. But lately more people—like the U.S. mayors—are comparing bottled water not to Coke or Budweiser, but instead to the free, clean stuff flowing out of taps. Since bottled water requires petroleum to create its containers, is often trucked across the country to supermarkets, and leaves millions of plastic shells behind in landfills after it's guzzled, that's a comparison that's necessarily less flattering.

The messaging in the new ads—hey, it's all water, whether it's from a tap or a bottle—represents the latest twist in the industry's attempt to portray itself in better light. "It's unfortunate that we've gotten into this situation where [people are] pitting tap water against bottled water," IBWA president Joseph Doss told NEWSWEEK. "We don't disparage tap water and we just think it's a good thing if people are drinking water." Three in four Americans, according to industry research, drink both tap and bottled water, depending on where they are and what they feel like drinking. Consumers shouldn't look at bottled versus tap as an either-or proposition, the industry is suggesting. Instead, they should look favorably on both types of water, and consider bottled water when tap isn't an option. "[A]s far as we're concerned, the drink in everyone's purse, backpack and lunch box should be water," the ad proclaims.

Activists aren't surprised by the industry's counterpunch. "Certainly, other industries that come under pressure roll out image advertising," says Patti Lynn, campaign director of Corporate Accountability International, which has been trying to educate consumers about the detriments of bottled water through an initiative it calls "Think Outside the Bottle." And even as the new ads hit consumers' doorsteps, environmental advocates are still working hard on the issue. They're urging the industry's two other big players, Coca-Cola and Nestlé, to follow Pepsico's lead and provide more information on their labels. They're also continuing calls for Aquafina to remove the mountain images from its label, which the group believes implies to consumer that the bottle contains mountain spring water.

In the meantime, more cities are considering following the lead of San Francisco, which has banned city employees from using tax dollars to buy bottled water to consume at work. For a crisp, cool drink, it appears this will continue to be a long, hot summer.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20093192/site/newsweek/page/0/>

---

[MSN Privacy](#) . [Legal](#)

© 2007 MSNBC.com