

Bottled water no longer sparkles in public eye

By Teresa Winchester

Long considered a “healthy choice” drink, bottled water is now under scrutiny for its costs, quality, and impact on the environment. Nationally, the household cost for municipal water is less than one cent per gallon. The average cost of bottled water is \$1.20 per gallon – six times more than tap water!

A multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry in the United States, bottled water has even emerged as a moral issue. For some, opposition to bottled water is a matter of equitable access because one billion people worldwide don't have access to safe drinking water. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's “Save the Water” campaign posits that drinking bottled water encourages privatization, which can lead to water wars. Other bottled water opponents see it as corporate abuse — the takeover of a natural resource that should belong to everyone.

Even those of us who live in comfortable conditions without threat of water shortages or polluted water are at risk when we purchase bottled water. In 2007, the Natural Resources Defense Council conducted a study on bottled water which showed that one-third of the bottled water tested contained levels of contamination exceeding allowable limits under either state or bottled water industry standards.

In 2007, the consumer rights organization Food & Water Watch released “Take Back the Tap,” a report explaining why tap water “is better for your health, your pocketbook and the environment.” “TBT” challenges corporate control, abuse of food and water resources, and crunches the numbers in a convincing way, noting:

- **New York City consumers buy more than one billion bottles of water a year**, largely because advertising leads them to believe it is safer or better than tap water. In fact, NYC tap water is safe, clean and healthy, often more so than bottled water. Producing and transporting plastic bottles uses energy and produces greenhouse gases.
- **Tap water is safer than bottled water.** The federal government requires far more rigorous and frequent testing and monitoring of municipal drinking water than of bottled water. Also, chemicals from plastic bottles can leach into bottled water, which is never tested after bottling and storage.
- **Giving up bottled water helps our environment.** Annual production of plastic water bottles requires about 17.6 million barrels of oil, not including transportation – enough to fuel more than one million vehicles. About 86 percent of the empty plastic water bottles in the United States end up in landfills instead of being recycled.

In rural Otsego County, many residents use wells rather than public drinking water supplies. In some cases, hydrogen sulfide affects the taste of the water, making it unpleasant to drink. Rather than resorting to bottled water, households with this problem might consider treating the water. Several methods of removing sulfur from water are available, and the treatment method selected depends on many factors, including the level of sulfur, the amount of iron and manganese, and possible bacterial contamination. Treatments for sulfuric water include chlorine bleach, automatic chlorinators, iron removal filters, and aeration removal. More information on treating

well water is available through the Cornell Cooperative Extension website, <http://waterquality.cce.cornell.edu>.

The global view of water supply and its ethical implications, public and personal cost savings, misinformation on its superior taste and benefits to our health, and the heavy use of fossil fuels required both for production and post-production transportation – all argue for the abandonment of bottled water. OCCA therefore urges county residents to rethink their use of bottled water.

Ways to do this include asking for tap water at restaurants, carrying reusable water bottles, and urging elected officials to increase funding for public drinking water. Municipalities might hold water taste tests. Why don't we hold a contest to find out whose water tastes best in Otsego County? Also available on the "TBT" website is a guide on how to hold bottled-water-free events – something non-profits and businesses alike should consider. Check out the website (www.takebackthetap.org) and learn more interesting facts about water use and water policy.