

NEWS NATIONAL

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Cost to the environment, safety of plastic bottles among issues raised

By **VIVIAN SONG**

Testers are doing everything short of gurgling their samples.

Some tip it back like it's Russian vodka, some sip it like a fine wine, and others seem to roll the liquid around on their palates, contemplating the nuances.

It was an unscientific experiment in the Toronto Sun newsroom for yesterday's World Water Day, asking my colleagues to single out the water sample they liked best.

Interestingly, two of the six testers picked tap water, two picked Dasani -- which comes from the same public water source as a kitchen tap -- and the others were divided between Evian and Fiji water.

Words like "crisp," "sweet," and my personal favourite "quenchifying" were used amongst my wordsmith brethren, God bless them.

It was an experiment to see if water flown halfway around the world from Fiji and France bearing hoity labels such as "Artesian" would do the expected and take the top spot over lowly tap water.

The crusade against bottled water has become the latest environmental witch hunt, with groups decrying the artefact as folly: Bottled water is anywhere from 240 to 10,000 times more expensive than tap, despite the fact that about 25 per cent of bottled water comes from municipal supply, says The Polaris Institute.

Plastic bottles are made of fossil fuels and chemicals, refined and manufactured by big oil companies, the institute goes on to say.

Water bottles are made primarily from polyethylene terephthalate, or PET, which is derived from crude oil. According to the Earth Policy Institute, it takes 17 million barrels of oil annually to manufacture enough water bottles to satisfy U.S. demand -- enough to fuel more than one million cars in the U.S. for a year.

Americans consume the most bottled water in the world overall, drinking 26 billion litres in 2004, and about 20% of Canadians drink bottled water exclusively -- a habit that undermines the safety of tap water and commodifies a natural resource that's a public commons, environmentalists say.

But the Canadian Bottled Water Association is standing firm against the barrage of charges, saying they're unfairly vilified and misrepresented.

"People are not turning to bottled water in place of tap water," says executive director Elizabeth Griswold. "People are turning to bottled water in place of sugary, high caloric beverages."

It's the healthy alternative to soft drinks, she says, and helps to combat a social epidemic that threatens Canadian health -- obesity.

All food products come in food packaging, Griswold continues, and bottled water makes up a small proportion of plastic packaging. She also disputes widely cited recycling statistics environmentalists use as ammunition in their campaign against the industry -- that only a marginal percentage of bottles are recycled. According to the Environment and Plastics Industry Council, about half of the 125,775 tonnes of plastic beverage bottles generated in Canada in 2002 were recycled.

In 2006, a German study made headlines for concluding that the longer water is stored in plastic bottles, the higher the concentration and likelihood of a toxic chemical, antimony, leaching into the water. Most of the 15 Canadian bottle samples had initial antimony levels of about 160 parts per trillion, but after six months of sitting in plastic, levels doubled.

Since then, Griswold has been hard at work pointing out that levels are well below Health Canada standards at 6,000 parts per trillion.

The bottled water industry withdraws a minute amount of water, she continues, at 0.2% of the overall North American water landscape.

But that's a misleading statistic, says bottled water campaigner Andrea Harden for Ottawa-based Polaris Institute.

"We need to look at the specific site where water is taken," she says. "We need to have a specific watershed to watershed analysis to understand the local impacts of watertaking."

As for charges of price gouging, Griswold says the typical purchase of water is in its bulk form, cases of 24,500 ml bottles, with a markup of about 30 cents per litre.

But therein lie the holes, Harden points out.

"If people are buying water in bulk, it's likely they are replacing bottled water for tap," she says.

Besides, she adds, 30 cents is still more than tap water, which is safe and leaves no environmental impact.

Fill up stainless steel containers with tap water, and push for public water fountains, Harden continues -- a long-lost priority among city planners allowing for public fountains to fall into disrepair.

"We need to challenge the idea of convenience and make a commitment."

BOTTLE-FREE ZONES

The Polaris Institute, the Sierra Youth Coalition, and the Canadian Federation of Students launched a campaign to establish bottled water-free zones on university and college campuses in time for yesterday's World Water Day. Some of the participating schools: University of Ottawa, Concordia University Brock University University of Guelph University of Waterloo Trent University Ryerson University University of Winnipeg Queen's University George Brown College

Cities that are moving away from bottled water:

- Los Angeles has been restricting the purchase of bottled water with city funds since 1987.
- San Francisco's departments and agencies are banned from purchasing bottled water, saving city coffers \$500,000 yearly.
- St. Louis is also poised to ban bottled water for city employees while Illinois state agencies are also banned from buying bottled water with government funds.
- Chicago placed a five cent tax on every bottled water sold to discourage consumption.
- New York City, Rome, Florence, and Paris have mounted campaigns promoting tap water.