

Banning the Bottle on Campus

Fact Sheet • June 2012

College students are often pioneers in activism, and today many are successfully fighting the bottled water industry. Bottled water costs on average thousands of times more than tap water, and its production and distribution contributes to a host of social, environmental and economic problems. Fortunately, university students are a driving force behind the important fight against this senseless privatization of our water. Since the first campus ban in 2009, many more have joined the movement. Several articles cite that roughly 90 universities have implemented bans¹; to date, around 50 of these have been confirmed through our own investigation.²

Why Ban Bottled Water on Your Campus?

The myths propagated by the bottled water industry in its clever advertising schemes can mislead consumers.³ For example, many bottled water consumers choose bottled over tap because they believe it is better quality.⁴ However, tap water is actually more strictly regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency than bottled water is by the Food and Drug Administration.⁵ In fact, today almost half of all bottled water comes from tap water systems.⁶ Bottled water consumers are often drinking tap water that has been packaged and processed and that costs thousands times more than drinking it straight from the tap.

The production of bottled water takes water that local communities need. Big bottling companies often take water from municipal or groundwater sources that local people depend on for drinking, recreation and more. A Government Accountability Office report points out that large-scale bottled water extraction can reduce the availability of local groundwater, surface water and the resources that depend on them.⁷ In Mecosta County, Michigan, for example, a botler pumped groundwater to the point that the connected surface water bodies became nothing but mud flats.⁸

The bottled water industry harms the environment. The industry uses a significant quantity of petroleum and energy just to manufacture the billions of plastic bottles produced in the United States each year,⁹ all so that in the end, these empty non-decomposable plastic bottles can pile up in landfills.¹⁰ A Pacific Institute study found that the manufacture, production and transportation of bottled water is 2,000 times more energy intensive than that of tap water.¹¹ And in the end, around 77 percent of all plastic water bottles end up in landfills.¹²



IMAGE COURTESY OF THOMAS MEYER / AU TAKE BACK THE TAP

College Student Movement to Ban Bottled Water

In 2009, Washington University in St. Louis became the first known university to ban the sale of bottled water and restrict the use of university funds to purchase it for meetings and events.¹³ It started with a group of concerned students who formed a coalition to educate their peers about the benefits of tap water.¹⁴ Their efforts led to a ban by the next year, except for in a few venues with contractual obligations.¹⁵ Since then, more colleges have joined the fight to ban bottled water and promote the tap.

Take Back the Tap students have taken various approaches to reach the long-term goal of banning all bottled water on college campuses. For example, Take Back the Tap campaigns have also worked for: a ban on the sale of bottled water, a partial ban on the sale of bottled water in certain venues, a ban on using university or student government funds to buy bottled water, and increasing access to reus-



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able water bottles and tap water refilling stations on campus. Examples of campuses that used these approaches are described below.

Students at the University of Portland in Oregon successfully banned the sale of bottled water on campus and prohibited bottled water at events requiring catering services in February 2010.¹⁶

Other campaigns have worked to ban the sale of bottled water in certain venues on campus. For example, in 2009, students at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, joined forces to raise awareness about the benefits of tap water, to encourage the use of refillable water stations, and to decrease campus bottled water consumption.¹⁷ The students successfully eliminated bottled water from their meal plans and within one year were able to see a 92 percent decrease in bottled water purchases.¹⁸ Clearly, partial bans can have a large impact.

Students can also work to ban the use of university funds to purchase bottled water. At the University of Houston, for example, a departmental ban on bottled water was instituted in Fall 2009.¹⁹ It prohibits departments from purchasing bottled water for staff and offices, but the university itself is not banned from selling bottled water.²⁰ Another approach is to ban the use of student organization funds to purchase bottled water. Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, took a similar step when its Take Back the Tap campaign passed a Bottle Ban Resolution through the Student Government Association stating that student funds would no longer be used to purchase bottled water.²¹

Finally, students can work to increase access to tap water infrastructure and to increase access to reusable water bottles. At the University of Iowa, the Student Government sustainability initiative and the Take Back the Tap student group successfully worked together, installing over a dozen hydration stations around campus. The hydration stations include sensors that calculate total plastic water bottles saved.²² American University, a Take Back the Tap campus in Washington, D.C., has provided all incoming freshmen a free reusable water bottle.²³ Furthermore, in April 2012, American's Student Government successfully passed a bill banning the distribution of bottled water at university events.²⁴

Join the Fight and Take Back the Tap!

Not all learning in college takes place inside the classroom. Ultimately, cutting back on and eliminating bottled

water on university and college campuses will help reduce irresponsible spending, lower carbon footprints, promote social and environmental responsibility among students, and support the right to safe, affordable, public water for all. These are lessons that students will take with them far beyond the end of the semester.

Please visit <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/take-back-the-tap/students/> and learn how your campus can Take Back the Tap.

Endnotes

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- 20 *Ibid.*
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