

The bottled water boondoggle

The Daily Inter Lake (MT)

Editorial

September 24, 2008

How about this for common sense: Americans should do away with bottled water, saving money and providing environmental benefits to boot.

Sure, the entire bottled water industry would suffer if a good share of the U.S. population suddenly developed an aversion to bottled water and a preference for tap water. But so what? The industry barely existed just 20 years ago.

Since then, it has burgeoned into a bizarre business relying on consumer behaviors that defy common sense. Some brands once claimed their water came from pure and exotic sources, but not any more. Check your labels and you'll see that most water is being bottled in common places such as St. Louis or New York City.

Why people living in the Flathead Valley, among the headwaters of the Columbia Basin, would prefer to buy bottled water from the lower Mississippi Basin is beyond us. Now, other people are starting to scratch their heads about the sense of the bottled water biz, too.

There was recently an attention-grabbing news story that a new company in New York City was bottling the city's tap water and selling it for \$1.50 per bottle.

The entrepreneur was certain the city's water was better than other brands of bottled water, and he was certain that people would pay for municipal water in a bottle. Never mind that the price exceeds the cost of an equivalent amount of gasoline, and who cares about the environmental costs of bottled water?

More people should. New movements have sprung up challenging the senselessness of bottled water in several cities, including New York, Boston and Chicago.

The New York group, called "Tap into the City," cites some remarkable statistics:

- Last year, Americans consumed 50 billion bottles of water, and 85 percent of those bottles ended up in landfills.
- Manufacturing and transporting the plastic bottles produces an estimated 2.5 million tons of carbon dioxide.
- Producing them requires 17 million barrels of oil annually, and transporting them requires another 30 million barrels. Combined, it's enough to fuel 3 million cars for a year.

Bottled water is probably with us to stay at some level, since convenience is a major selling point. But Americans need to suck it up and do the right thing. Maybe it won't even be painful. It's not too far-fetched to envision going back a few years to a simpler time when most folks simply filled up reusable bottles and thermoses from the tap.

It really wasn't that bad! And think of the savings!