

The Bottled Water Problem: Distrust, Harm and the Solution

Distrust in Government Drives Bottled Water Use

Erosion of Trust: In 2022, 20% of U.S. adults avoided tap water, up from 14% before the 2014 Flint water crisis. Among Black adults, avoidance rose to 35%, and among Hispanic adults, to 38%.

- **Martin County, KY:** 96% of residents rely on bottled water due to distrust in their water system.
- **Philadelphia, PA:** 40% of Philadelphians opt to drink bottled water over the tap at home.
- **Navajo Nation:** 72% of households use bottled water due to contamination concerns and generational distrust.

“Tap water is not even in our vocabulary,” said [Philadelphia] resident Phillip Walker. “We use that for cleaning, that’s it ... But as far as consumption — that’s not happening.” (WHYY PBS, 5/8/23)

Ripple Effect: Research shows that water quality issues in one system can erode trust in otherwise healthy systems hundreds of miles away.

Bottled Water Harms Consumers, Communities and the Environment

For Consumers:

- Bottled water is thousands of times more expensive than tap water. A \$1.29 bottle of water could be refilled daily for nine years with tap water at the same cost.
- Low-income families spend up to \$1,350 annually on bottled water, disproportionately burdening minority communities.

For Communities:

- Heavy reliance on bottled water undermines investment in public water systems, perpetuating inequities and leaving underserved populations without reliable access to safe tap water.

For the Environment:

- Only 9% of plastic bottles are recycled, putting millions of tons in landfills or polluting ecosystems.
- Bottled water’s impact on natural resources is 3,500 times higher than tap water, and its ecosystem impact is 1,400 times greater.

Bottled Water Is Not Safer Than Tap Water

Federal Regulations: Tap water is strictly regulated by the Safe Drinking Water Act, yet no similar regulations are in place for bottled water and manufacturers are allowed to do their own testing. Still, 40% of Americans believe bottled water is safer than tap water.

Microplastics: Bottled water contains 22 times more microplastic particles than tap water.

Rebuilding Trust Through Infrastructure Investment

Modernizing Systems: Aging water infrastructure is a key contributor to public distrust. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has identified a drinking water investment need of \$629 billion over the next 20 years to replace outdated pipes, improve treatment facilities and ensure safe, reliable water delivery. That's why regulated, private water companies collectively invest \$6 billion each year into the community water systems they serve.

Professionalized Operations: Transparent, accountable and professionally managed water utilities can restore confidence in tap water systems. Regular testing, public reporting and community engagement are critical components of rebuilding trust.

Economic Benefits: Every \$1 invested in water infrastructure generates \$4 in economic returns.

The Path Forward

Investing in modern water infrastructure and professionalized operations is essential to breaking the cycle of distrust and reducing harmful reliance on bottled water. By prioritizing these efforts, we can protect public health, strengthen communities and safeguard the environment for future generations.

Sources: The Associated Press, "US pushes for better tap water but must win over wary public" Jan. 2022; The Guardian, "It smells bad, it tastes bad: how Americans stopped trusting their water" Sept. 2020; WHYY PBS, "Philly's tap water has a trust problem. Did the recent contamination scare make it worse?" May 2023; The Arizona Republic, "Navajo families don't trust their tap water, study says, and overpay for outside supplies" Nov. 2024; Teodoro et al., *The Profits of Distrust: Citizen-Consumers, Drinking Water, and the Crisis of Confidence in American Government*, 2022; Scripps News, "Is Your Bottled Water Really That Much Different From Tap Water?" May 2022; DigDeep, "Draining: The Economic Impact of America's Hidden Water Crisis" 2022; Abraham et al., "Rethinking bottled water in public health discourse" Sept. 2024; Jaffee, *Unbottled: The Fight against Plastic Water and for Water Justice* 2023; The Guardian, "Environmental impact of bottled water 'up to 3,500 times greater than tap water'" Aug. 2021; Cox et al., "Human Consumption of Microplastics" 2019; EPA, "7th Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey and Assessment (DWINSAs), Sept. 2023; United Nations, "Every dollar invested in water, sanitation brings four-fold return in costs," 2014.