



September 17, 2008

Dear Mr. Lauria:

Thank you for providing Food & Water Watch with the opportunity to respond to your column about bottled water, "An Open Letter to Environmentalists."

Your opening homage to John Muir aside, we believe that the extraction, bottling and mass marketing of spring water – or any community's water, for that matter – would trouble the renowned conservationist. In fact, packaging and exporting water away from its source contradicts the essence of conservation. It exemplifies one of Muir's keen observations: "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." Indeed, water is the ultimate attachment, the quintessential connection that sustains all life, ecosystems and economies. Universal access to this vital public resource should be guaranteed in the United States and across the world.

In your letter, you fail to mention some key points about the history of bottled water, its environmental destructiveness, labeling and the public's right to know, as well as the realities of waste and recycling.

First off, just because Muir and President Teddy Roosevelt drank from the springs that feed the soul of the Sierra Nevada mountain range doesn't mean they would want those waters to be packaged and shipped away. The majority of bottled spring water in the 1800s and the early 1900s came from sources reputed to hold medicinal value. People visited places such as Saratoga Springs in New York to drink from or bathe in the water. It was bottled in glass and, for the most part, consumed on site. In some cases, people would purchase and carry a few bottles home with them.

However, that's far different than the mass production and marketing of bottled water that exploded in the last century. In 1976 in the United States, 300 thousand gallons of bottled water were consumed; the number rocketed up to 3.4 million gallons in 1997. Unfortunately, it didn't stop there. By 2005, Nestlé, Coke, Pepsi and other companies were taking water from communities across the country and packaging it in some 26 billion plastic bottles.

Those figures are fraught with grim energy and environmental implications. Approximately three liters of water are required to produce one liter of bottled water. The total amount of energy used to produce, transport, refrigerate and dispose of a plastic bottle of water may be equivalent to filling one-quarter of a one-liter bottle with oil.

Annual production of plastic bottles to meet U.S. consumer demand for bottled water takes the equivalent of about 17.6 million barrels of oil, not including the cost of transporting the bottled water to consumers. The production and transportation of bottled water spew more than 2.5 million tons of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere where it contributes to global climate change. The resulting altered weather patterns are reducing precipitation, and thus water regeneration in aquifers, in the very places from which companies are extracting water.

Your letter seems to dismiss such environmental issues with a call for more recycling. But here again you're neglecting important points. Once U.S. consumers have finished with those 26 billion plastic water bottles, about 86 percent of them end up in a landfill instead of a recycling bin.

Aside from the energy and environmental considerations, one must also consider the inequities of allowing big companies to come into a community and take water. In 2003, Nestlé Waters withdrew an estimated 1.8 billion gallons of water for its U.S. bottled water production. When the flow and level of a region's springs, wetlands, lakes, streams and rivers are materially affected by extraction for bottling, the entire local and even regional environment suffers. This extends to the activities that depend on the water – agriculture, individuals, businesses, tourism and recreation. And the same goes for Pepsi and Coke tapping city water supplies for their Aquafina and Dasani brands.

Many communities across the country develop water management plans that take into account such issues as population and climate, including drought. The people and businesses living and operating there have to live within the rules set forth in those plans, but bottling companies too often get a nearly free pass, even though they are permanently removing water from a community's aquifer.

Indeed, McCloud, California, provides a good example. In the face of citizen and political opposition, Nestlé backed off its original plan to build a bottling plant and extract about 500 million gallons of water annually. Concerned citizens learned that the proposed contract, which Nestlé now wants to renegotiate, would have given the company preference over the town's ratepayers because it could draw all the water it wished, regardless of drought or water shortage. What's more, the local water district would bear all the responsibility for the wellbeing of the springs and the water infrastructure. The plan would have had Nestlé paying the community only one penny for every 17 gallons of water it took.

The extraction of any community's water for sale sets up a frightening scenario. We are seeing a steady shift of a public resource, water, into private hands. No one owns water. The people and businesses in a watershed have the right to use it reasonably for drinking, growing food and other activities *within the community*. Over the long term, it could become difficult for states and local governments to regulate water removal, precisely because the water will be seen, in legal terms, as severed from the community and classified as a product. Companies could challenge any attempted regulation under the auspices of the World Trade Organization or other free trade agreements, which prioritize corporate access to markets over wise resource management.

Shouldn't the public have the right to know all of these facts about bottled water? Shouldn't consumers also know about the contaminants in bottled water and its source? We think so. Unfortunately, despite your assertions of openness, IBWA and the companies it represents have consistently fought labels and other forms of disclosure that would give consumers at least some insight into the bottled water they buy.

Instead of labels and the right-to-know, you tout beverage companies' compliance with Food and Drug Administration regulations regarding bottled water. You must know that the agency has less than one full time employee to oversee the nation's bottled water production. In effect, the bottled water companies are policing themselves.

I must return to your call for recycling because it speaks to our different beliefs when it comes to water. Although recycling is good and important (though energy intensive), relying on it as the solution for billions upon billions of new plastic bottles each year runs counter to the eco-ethic you're promoting. *Reduce* and *reuse* come first in the now famous circular REDUCE-REUSE-RECYLCE icon for a reason. They are truly in line with conservation. That means leaving water for the communities that use and rely on it. We don't need to bottle water, for we have an infrastructure to transport water directly to houses and businesses. Drinking water from the tap exacts a far lower toll on our Earth and our pocketbooks than getting it from a bottle, no matter where the bottle ends up.

That said, we must do more to protect our source water – aquifers, springs, lakes, rivers and streams – from pollution. We also must invest resources in repairing and upgrading the drinking water and waste water systems upon which we all rely. To do that, we need a federal trust fund to guarantee clean, safe and pure water for everyone, everywhere across America.

For more information on these issues, please visit our website at [www.foodandwaterwatch.org](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org).

Sincerely,

Wenonah Hauter  
Executive Director  
Food & Water Watch