Food & Water Watch works to ensure the food, water and fish we consume is safe, accessible and sustainably produced. So that we can all enjoy and trust in what we eat and drink, we help people take charge of where their food comes from; keep clean, affordable, public tap water flowing freely to our homes; protect the environmental quality of oceans; work to ensure that the government does its job protecting citizens; and educate about the importance of keeping the global commons — our shared resources — under public control. We envision a world where all people have access to enough affordable, healthy and wholesome food and clean water to meet their basic needs — a world in which governments are accountable to their citizens and manage essential resources sustainably.

2009 marked Food & Water Watch’s fourth year and saw much success for our growing organization. We have three national program areas: food, water, and fish.

Our Food Program works to improve food safety and food labeling so that consumers know what they’re buying. The program also works to promote sustainable agriculture and to oppose factory farming. Our Food Program organizers work across the country to engage the public on food policy issues.

After a lengthy campaign, in 2009 we finally gained school systems the right to serve better, safer milk in their cafeterias. We’ve also fought against plans to give more power to large agricultural corporations, which would hurt small and organic farmers and would be a serious threat to food safety by letting companies self-monitor.

Our Fish Program works to promote clean, green and safe seafood for consumers while helping to protect the environment and support coastal communities. Seafood consumers tell us regularly that they are paying more attention to the fish they eat, the value they get from that fish and what it does for them as well as for the world around them.

This year in Louisiana, our work brought about an important public awareness campaign on imported seafood. We have been working with activists across the nation to pressure relevant agencies into including seafood in country-of-origin labeling laws, so that consumers can be fully informed when purchasing seafood.

We made big gains in the number of our supporters in 2009, increasing our email list database from 130,000 to 160,000 by the end of the year. In the first quarter of 2009, those supporters took 100,000 actions, such as writing letters to decision-makers or signing electronic petitions, and they took nearly 160,000 actions in the final quarter. In 2010, we will continue to grow and will take on even more fights for safer food and clean, publicly owned water supplies.

Our Water Program works with grassroots organizations to prevent the privatization of public water resources, both through the purchase of local utilities and through the bottling and selling of a community’s water. The program also works to reduce the sales and consumption of bottled water, which is far more expensive than tap water and creates mountains of garbage.
In 2009, private water corporations continued to tempt communities across America with sweet-sounding offers to purchase underfunded water systems. Towns that sell their systems usually find that their water rates go up while the quality of service goes down. Food & Water Watch has become the go-to organization for answers and assistance when communities wish to prevent such a sale or attempt to re-municipalize a private water system. In 2009, we have been instrumental in public versus private water struggles in numerous towns and cities.

When large festivals want to become “greener” and reduce their environmental impact, they are increasingly turning to Food & Water Watch for help in hosting a bottled water-free event. In 2009, our guide and our expertise helped several big events provide clean, safe tap water instead of bottled water.

**Food Program**

Big agriculture and large food corporations seek to face fewer inspections and less regulation, as well as to provide consumers with less information about their products. Food & Water Watch believes that consumers have every right to safe food and to accurate information about it.

Every year, thousands of Americans are sickened by tainted food. Some even lose their lives. We believe that the regulatory agencies that oversee the safety of our food should receive increased funding and authority so that they can be more effective in protecting something so important.

We also believe that consumers should have the right to full information about the food they buy. If a certain brand of milk comes from cows that have been treated with artificial growth hormone, people should be able to make an informed decision about whether or not to purchase that milk. And school systems should certainly have the right to serve kids milk without artificial hormones.
Below are a few of the Food Program’s victories in the fight for safer, healthier food in 2009:

**Giving Schools the Option to Choose Organic or Growth Hormone-free Milk**

In November, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released an updated set of policies for state and local officials who purchase food for school lunch programs. The policy memo made it clear that schools are allowed to purchase organic or recombinant bovine growth hormone-free milk. Until recently, many school systems had no choice in what type of milk they could buy to serve in their lunchrooms, which often meant they had to buy milk from cows given rBGH.

We had been pushing for a change in federal policy through our school milk campaign. After almost a year of local organizing in preparation for the re-authorization of the Child Nutrition Act, we were able to get the USDA to change the policy on their own. Now that this policy has been made clear, local groups can organize around getting their school system to switch to better milk. Already, groups we worked with in the Chicago area have had success, and three Chicago-area schools, Evanston, Glenview and Oak Park, have gone rBGH-free.

**Advocating for Local and Regional Food Systems**

How to address food safety concerns remains a key issue in the growing sustainable food movement. We addressed produce safety with both the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), where crop-specific guidance was being developed that could become binding regulation, and the USDA, which considered a public-private standard-making process for setting safety standards for leafy greens.

In the fall, we continued to connect more-traditional consumer groups, who have been pushing for strong food safety legislation, with sustainable agriculture and small farm groups concerned about potential impacts of such legislation, convening conference calls with both sides and facilitating meetings between FDA officials, policymakers and small farm groups.

We helped coordinate broad opposition to a proposal to create a marketing agreement that would allow the biggest players in the leafy greens industry to develop their own food safety standards and then have USDA inspectors certify that the standards are being followed. Products that follow this regimen could be labeled with a special seal. After the 2006 E. coli outbreak that was traced to California spinach, the California industry developed a similar marketing agreement for leafy greens under state law. The state program has been met with strong criticism from environmentalists who are concerned about the program’s strict requirements of bare-earth buffers between fields, removal of wildlife, and other practices that have damaged water quality.

Food & Water Watch played a lead role in organizing a coalition to oppose the creation of a national food safety marketing plan, recruiting other groups to get involved and to testify at hearings across the country. Staff attended three of the seven hearings held on the proposal, testifying in opposition at one hearing and coordinating other groups’ testimony at two others. We also wrote large portions of the coalition’s legal brief to the USDA, which urged that the agency not approve the proposed marketing agreement. In 2010,
we plan to educate key decision-makers about the widespread opposition to this plan (including a petition with more than 7,000 signatures opposing the proposal) to ensure that this type of inadequate food safety marketing agreement is not replicated.

Fish Program

Seafood consumers routinely tell us that they are paying more attention to the fish they eat and where it comes from. As a result, Food & Water Watch is very interested in U.S. fisheries management as it relates to the product that consumers ultimately receive, and we are working to direct national policy on a number of fronts. We advocate support for land-based recirculating aquaculture systems, while strongly opposing the introduction of problematic open ocean aquaculture into U.S. waters; we advocate a government-controlled Fair Fish approach to the allocation of privileges to catch wild fish, while strongly opposing the privatization of access to U.S. fish stocks; and we work on seafood safety by encouraging the U.S. government to inspect seafood imports and to improve labeling to ensure that consumers know where their seafood originates.

Here are a few highlights of the Fish Program’s work in 2009:

Seafood Safety

In late August, Louisiana shrimpers started a series of protests urging fair prices for domestic wild-caught shrimp, asserting that cheap, often polluted imports are undercutting the prices received for their catch. Because of our past relationships with the shrimpers, as well as our Suspicious Shrimp and Import Alert reports, they contacted us for support and guidance. One of our organizers traveled to Louisiana, where she attended and spoke at protests (including one with over 300 participants), media events and organizing meetings. As a result, Governor Bobby Jindal ensured that the Department of Agriculture and Forestry, the Louisiana Retailers Association and the Louisiana Restaurant Association will work on a public awareness campaign on imported seafood.

As of January 1, 2010, Louisiana will also require the state health officer to devise a warning label or statement for menus, tables and walls of restaurants and seafood dealers detailing the risks of eating Chinese seafood, including the potential risk of cancer from some chemicals used in treating the imported products. The signs can also encourage customers to eat Louisiana seafood.

We are currently working with activists from Louisiana and elsewhere to pressure various agencies to expand country-of-origin labeling requirements to include all seafood, no matter where it is sold or how it is processed.

OktoberFish

We’ve declared October the official month to celebrate sustainable seafood as we work hard to protect our oceans and ensure that consumers have access to delicious, affordable seafood that’s healthy for them and the environment. We call this now-annual celebration “OktoberFish,” and 2009’s event was again a great success. This year our focus was on increasing opportunities for our activists to get involved on our issues — and we put a face on each of the issues, with fantastic results. Each week we sent email alerts about a hot topic, asking our activists to take an action at the behest of someone very close to the matter — a commercial fisherman, a re-circulating-aquaculture entrepreneur, a recreational fisherman, etc. We got rave reviews for our alerts and inspired thousands of comments on our targets.

Our second annual seafood recipe contest took place during September, and the winners were announced in October as part of OktoberFish. This year we titled the contest “Frugal Fish,” and people sent in recipes for preparing a sustainable seafood dinner for four for under $25. Our staff and Chef/Restaurant Liaison
Rocky Barnette prepared and judged the recipes. We collected an outstanding variety of meals that we then put into a new “Fish & Tips on a Budget” online-only cook booklet. The contest, winners and dishes received press nationwide and the booklet itself is very popular.

**Water Program**

Because we believe that water is a public resource, Food & Water Watch helps groups in cities where the local leadership is considering full-asset sale of their water utilities, leasing their utilities, or privatizing management of their utilities. We provide research material and put the groups in contact with other groups who face similar struggles. If a group decides that privatization is not the option for their community, we offer strategic advice on how to persuade local officials not to privatize their water systems. We guide groups through their possible options, such as ballot initiatives and referendums, as well as legal and financial options.

Our “Take Back the Tap” campaign offers a variety of services to local governments, public utilities, universities and grassroots organizations across the country.

Our work involves assisting city officials and university students in educating communities about the risks of water privatization, utility mismanagement, groundwater depletion and other pressing issues relating to water ownership and water quality. We also bring together utilities and environmental groups to develop smart alternatives to municipal water privatization.

We also work to inform people about the facts on bottled water: It is not safer than tap water, which is regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency and is subject to more stringent regulation than bottled water. Bottled water is inspected by the Food and Drug Administration, which is underfunded and short-staffed and sends inspectors to bottling plants only once every two to three years.

Take a look at some of the Water Program’s successes in the past year:

**Fighting Water Privatization in Florida**

In this economic climate, selling off a public water system can be a strong temptation for a struggling community. Private water companies like to swoop in and claim to offer a solution, but as many communities that have sold their water systems can attest, a sale is not the answer. It often leads to higher prices and worse service.

Food & Water Watch provides much-needed help to communities who want to fight back — either in preventing a sale from happening or in regaining public control of a private water system.

Aqua America, the second largest publicly traded water and wastewater corporation in the country, has an aggressive strategy of acquisition and drastic rate increases. The company targets small systems to avoid citizen resistance to the takeover of the utility, and it selects areas with expected population growth. Once in control, Aqua America quickly pursues rate increases, which it uses to generate returns for its shareholders. Even in this economic climate, the company continues to increase profits; in fact, its profits exceeded 2008 levels by 7.5 percent in the first three quarters of 2009. However, the company sends profits to shareholders instead of investing in the system,
and customers suffer as a result. In response to drastic rate increases and water quality concerns, consumers across the country are organizing against Aqua America.

This year, eight communities from across the state of Florida served by Aqua America joined us to form a statewide coalition. The three groups and Food & Water Watch have agreed to work on a statewide campaign to ask state officials to freeze any new Aqua acquisitions, reduce the rate of return that Aqua makes in Florida and help communities remunicipalize their water systems. This new coalition will call itself Florida FLOW (For Local Ownership of Water). We are demanding better oversight of the company and want to remunicipalize local water systems.

Florida FLOW will serve as a model for similar fights across the country. People can stand up against giant private water corporations and maintain or regain control of their local water systems, and we will be there to help them.

**Desalination Isn’t the Answer**

Desalination shouldn’t be used as a quick fix to our water shortage problems. Conservation and recycling programs may be a much less expensive and less risky alternative to building desalination plants. Residents of California, Florida, Massachusetts and Texas are particularly affected by this issue, because desalination companies want to make those states guinea pigs for the rest of the nation.

In 2009, Food & Water Watch helped groups in several states fight desalination projects. We actively organized against public subsidies for Poseidon Resources’ 50 million gallon per day desalination facility in Carlsbad, Calif. We led a coalition opposing $250 million in subsidies from the Metropolitan Water District (MWD), getting a sign-on letter from 40 groups in opposition to the subsidies and generating over 400 emails from activists to MWD board members. Prior to a hearing by the MWD committee considering the issue, we organized a press conference at which over 40 activists held signs before speaking at the hearing against subsidies.

The committee initially sided with our coalition, attaching conditions to any public subsidies that would have made the project untenable. However, intervention by the governor and a back-room deal cut between MWD board members resulted in the committee’s initial decision being reversed by the full board. The issue was covered extensively in the media with stories in the *Los Angeles Times*, *North County Times* and *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and radio coverage on KPFK.

There are still additional regulatory hurdles that must be cleared before this plant can be built, and the alliances we made opposing these subsidies will help in our future efforts to stop water privatization in California.

**Bottle-Free Events**

In 2009, Food & Water Watch helped a number of large events operate without bottled water, preventing mountains of empty bottles from ending up in landfills and bringing attention to the growing tap water movement.

We made the Vermont Brewers Festival bottled water-free this summer. The festival, which features 35 craft brewers, is in its 17th year and attracts more than 10,000 people annually, with 40 percent from out of state. The festival organizers were interested in having a “greener” profile and contacted us about a water
solution for a site that had only one public water tap. We assisted them with technical planning and provided four staff members to help manage the water tent. It was Vermont’s first bottled water-free outdoor festival and it has already inspired another large festival to go bottled water-free. We’re looking forward to expanding our presence in the New England region and beyond.

In California, we continued our work to promote tap water over bottled water through bottle-free events and providing it at major events. In Los Angeles, we worked with the Santa Monica Farmers Market to make the four farmers markets in Santa Monica bottled water-free. The announcement of the joint effort between Food & Water Watch and the City of Santa Monica featured former mayor and current council member Richard Bloom, who signed a massive petition supporting tap water. The event was covered in the Los Angeles Times food blog and Santa Monica Daily Press. In Oakland, we worked with our partners at U.S. Pure Water to provide tap water and information about the problems with bottled water at the Eat Real Festival.

At the Dogfish Dash charity fun in Milton, Delaware, we helped make this fourth annual event bottled water-free for the first time. The 1,000 runners and the spectators drank tap water from kegs. Our staff helped to serve the water as well as educate participants about why they should Take Back the Tap. The Dogfish brewers were really pleased with our help in the success with the Vermont Brewers Festival.

**Financials**

In order to maintain our independence, Food & Water Watch does not accept corporate or government contributions.

We are grateful to our 12,000 members in 2009 who provided generous support without which our success would not be possible. They include the following foundations:

- Boston Foundation
- Compton Foundation
- Environment Now
- Fledgling Fund
- Goldman Fund
- Helianthus Fund
- Panta Rhea
- Park Foundation
- Tikvah Fund
- Oxfam Novib
- Rose Foundation

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About Food & Water Watch

Food & Water Watch is a non-profit organization working with grassroots organizations around the world to create an economically and environmentally viable future. Through research, public and policy-maker education, media and lobbying, we advocate policies that guarantee safe, wholesome food produced in a humane and sustainable manner and public, rather than private, control of water resources including oceans, rivers and groundwater. For more information, visit www.foodandwaterwatch.org.

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