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ENVIRONMENT

Anti-bottled water campaign enlists mayors to cause

A campaign to wean consumers from bottled water enlists South Florida restaurants and city governments to the cause.

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An aisle at the Publix on Seventh Street in downtown Miami gleams with shelf upon shelf of bottled water that boasts of originating from the French Alps to Fiji.

But those bottles of water are increasingly coming under attack from environmental activists, who maintain tap water is better and bottled water is economically unsound and environmentally harmful, a position the bottling industry disputes.

The city of Miami has joined the fray, ordering officials in March to stop spending city money on bottled water in under two-liter containers.

Miami's Mayor Manny Diaz is among more than a dozen mayors calling on municipal governments to phase out bottled-water purchases in a resolution to be presented at the U.S. Mayors Conference, which begins Friday in Miami.

The bottles aren't just out at City Hall. Pacific Time and Fratelli Lyon, neighboring restaurants in Miami's Design District, have stopped selling bottled water and only serve tap. Sales of bottled water at Pacific Time used to bring in \$80,000 in annual revenues from sales of about 12,000 bottles, the restaurant's chef and owner Jonathan Eismann said Thursday at an event to promote tap usage.

Eismann said that not selling bottles reduces waste and is a way to "encourage more sustainable eating habits."

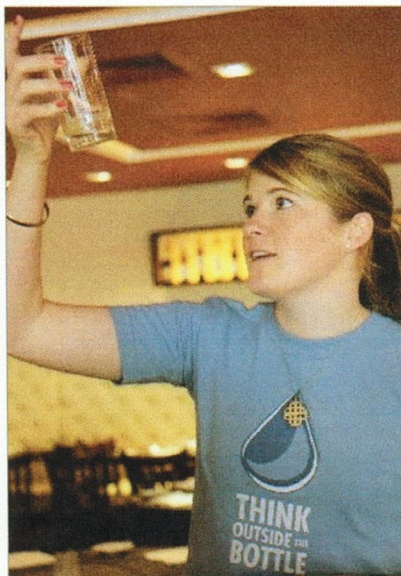
But bottled water remains ubiquitous with many consumers, like Ariadna Barrantens of Miami, who shun tap water and exclusively drink bottled.

While picking up a few gallons at Publix this week, she said she uses bottled water even to make coffee because she does not trust the quality of what comes out of her faucet. She added, though, that she sometimes wonders whether bottled water is much better.

The belief that tap water is less healthy and less pure than bottled water has city officials and activists worried.

Deborah Lapidus, who represents the Think Outside the Bottle campaign that organized Thursday's event, blames "tricky marketing and clever labels" used by companies selling bottled water for the perception their products are better than tap.

Bottling industry officials contend bottled water is purified more than tap water. Allegations by anti-bottle activists are simply "green-washing," said Kevin Keane, a spokesman for the American Beverage Association. He said bottled water is convenient and is useful during emergencies such as hurricanes.



JOHN VANBEEKUM / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Molly Burke, an intern from Boston with Corporate Accountability International, checks the bottom of a water glass as part of a water taste test on Wednesday.

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Lapidus' group argues that the popularity of bottled water reduces the political will to maintain and improve infrastructure to ensure quality municipal water. Still, she encourages people to switch to tap water and praised Miami for having some of the highest-quality tap water in the nation.

Diaz supports the cause, saying that Miami has great water and it's cheaper.

City Commissioner Marc Sarnoff, who pushed for the City Hall ban -- which he says could save the city as much as \$200,000 a year -- joined the tap movement because of concerns about litter. He said 85 percent of bottles are not recycled, and contribute to clogging in Miami's sewer systems.

He attributed current flooding in Brickell and the Venetian Islands to sewer systems stuffed with the plastic containers. He also pointed out that it takes petroleum to make the bottles, holding up a plastic bottle filled with dark liquid. He said almost a quarter of the liquid represented the oil needed to produce and transport the bottle.

The pro-tap movement has yet to make a dent in sales of bottled water, which continued to grow in 2007, according to John Sicher, editor and publisher of Beverage Digest magazine. He said the sales growth had slowed slightly from 2006 to 2007. He attributed that to the economic downturn and said it was "too early to tell" if the movement against bottled water was affecting the industry.

The trend is taking hold in some quarters. On a recent film shoot in South Beach, the producers of the new comedy *Farlanders*, starring John Krasinski and Maggie Gyllenhaal, banned coolers of water bottles from the set.

Instead, cast and crew were given washable aluminum bottles that they filled from large water jugs, said city of Miami Beach film coordinator Graham Winick. Cups for cold drinks like punch and soda were made from corn, as were the trash bags. Coffee cups were biodegradable, too, Winick said.

"It is the first almost fully 'green' shoot we've had," Winick said in an e-mail.

Miami Herald staff writer Douglas Hanks contributed to this report.

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