

Bottled Water Masks World's Failure to Supply Safe Water for All, Can Slow Sustainable Development: UN

The bottled water industry is masking a crippling world problem: the failure of public systems to supply reliable drinking water for all, a key SDG target

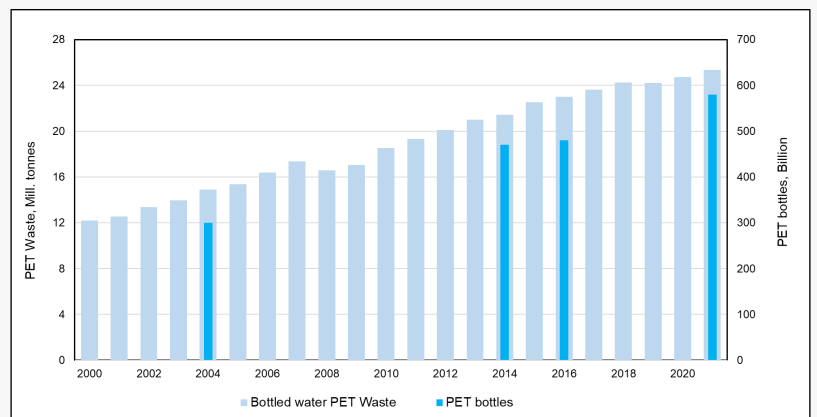
HAMILTON, ONTARIO, CANADA, March 16, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The rapidly-growing bottled water industry can undermine progress towards a key sustainable development goal: safe water for all, says a new United Nations report.

Based on an analysis of literature and data from 109 countries, the report says that in just five decades bottled water has developed into “a major and essentially standalone economic sector,” experiencing 73% growth from 2010 to 2020. And sales are expected to almost double by 2030, from US\$ 270 billion to \$500 billion.

Released a few days prior to World Water Day (March 22), the report by UN University’s Canadian-based Institute for Water, Environment and Health concludes that the unrestricted expansion of the bottled water industry “is not aligned strategically with the goal of providing universal access to drinking water or at least slows global progress in this regard,



Global Bottled Water Industry: A Review of Impacts and Trends: report cover



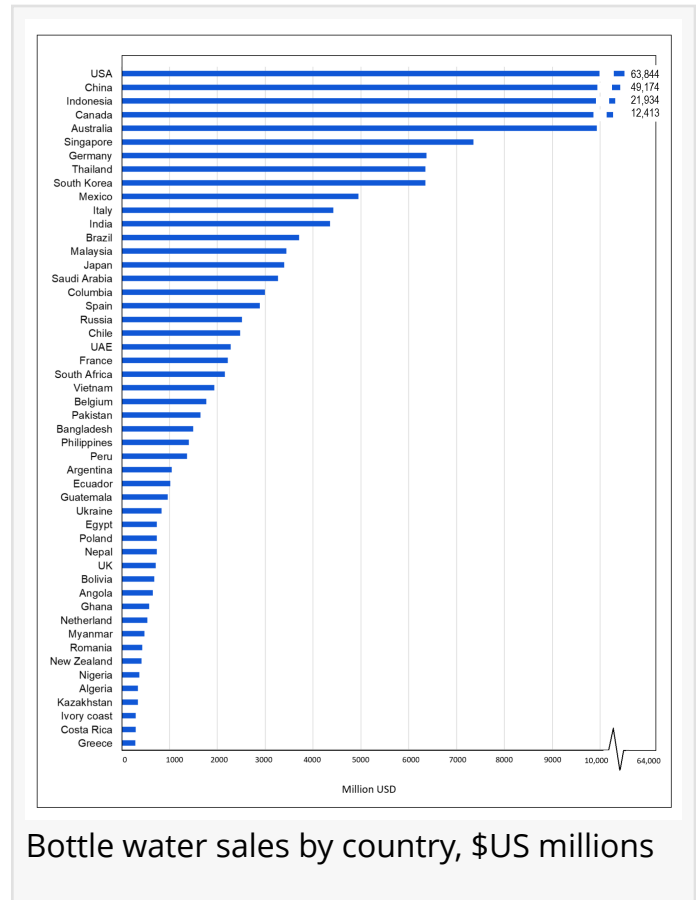
Bottled water PET plastic waste

distracting development efforts and redirecting attention to a less reliable and less affordable option for many, while remaining highly profitable for producers.”

Says Kaveh Madani, [UNU-INWEH](#)’s new Director: “The rise in bottled water consumption reflects decades of limited progress in and many failures of public water supply systems.”

When the Sustainable Development Goals were agreed in 2015, he notes, experts elsewhere estimated an annual investment of US\$ 114 billion was needed from 2015 to 2030 to achieve a key target: universal safe drinking water.

The report says providing safe water to the roughly 2 billion people without it would require an annual investment of less than half the US\$ 270 billion now spent every year on bottled water.



Bottle water sales by country, \$US millions

“This points to a global case of extreme social injustice, whereby billions of people worldwide do not have access to reliable water services while others enjoy water luxury.”

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UNU-INWEH Director Kaveh Madani

Tap water perceptions

The study quotes surveys showing bottled water is often perceived in the Global North as a healthier and tastier product than tap water – more a luxury good than a necessity. In the Global South, sales are driven by the lack or absence of reliable public water supplies and water delivery infrastructure limitations due to rapid urbanization.

In mid- and low-income countries, bottled water

consumption is linked to poor tap water quality and often unreliable public water supply systems – problems often caused by corruption and chronic underinvestment in piped water infrastructure.

Beverage corporations are adept at marketing bottled water as a safe alternative to tap water by drawing attention to isolated public water system failures, says UNU-INWEH researcher and lead

author Zeineb Bouhlel, adding that “even if in certain countries piped water is or can be of good quality, restoring public trust in tap water is likely to require substantial marketing and advocacy efforts.”

Not necessarily safe

Dr. Bouhlel notes that the source of bottled water (municipal system, surface, etc.) the treatment processes used (e.g. chlorination, ultraviolet disinfection, ozonation, reverse osmosis), the storage conditions (duration, light exposure, temperature), and packaging (plastic, glass), can all potentially alter water quality. This may be inorganic (e.g. heavy metals, pH, turbidity etc.), organic (benzene, pesticides, microplastics, etc.) and microbiological (pathogenic bacteria, viruses, fungus and parasitic protozoa).

According to the report, “the mineral composition of bottled water can vary significantly between different brands, within the same brand in different countries, and even between different bottles of the same batch.”

The report lists examples from over 40 countries in every world region of contamination of hundreds of bottled water brands and all bottled water types.

“This review constitutes strong evidence against the misleading perception that bottled water is an unquestionably safe drinking water source,” says Dr. Bouhlel.

Water bottlers generally face less scrutiny than public water utilities

Co-author Vladimir Smakhtin, past Director of UNU-INWEH, underscores the report’s finding that “bottled water is generally not nearly as well-regulated and is tested less frequently and for fewer parameters. Strict water quality standards for tap water are rarely applied to bottled water, and even if such analyses are carried out, the results seldom make it to the public domain.”

Bottled water producers, he says, have largely avoided the scrutiny governments impose on public water utilities, and amid the market’s rapid growth, it is “probably more important than ever to strengthen legislation that regulates the industry overall, and its water quality standards in particular.”

With respect to the industry’s environmental impacts, the report says there is “little data available on water volumes extracted,” largely due to the lack of transparency and legal foundation that would have forced bottling companies to disclose that information publicly and assess the environmental consequences.”

“Local impacts on water resources may be significant,” the report says.

In the USA, for example, Nestlé Waters extracts 3 million litres a day from Florida Springs; in France, Danone extracts up to 10 million litres a day from Evian-les-Bains in the French Alps; and in China, the Hangzhou Wahaha Group extracts up to 12 million litres daily from Changbai Mountains springs.

Regarding plastic pollution, the researchers cite estimates that the industry produced around 600 billion plastic bottles and containers in 2021, which converts to some 25 million tonnes of PET waste – most of it not recycled and destined for landfills – a mass of plastic equal to the weight of 625,000 40-ton trucks, enough to form a bumper-to-bumper line from New York to Bangkok.

According to the report, the bottled water sector used 35% of the PET bottles produced globally in 2019; 85% wind up in landfills or unregulated waste.

Full news release: <https://bit.ly/3LbkWT8>

"Global Bottled Water Industry: A Review of Impacts and Trends," by Zeineb Bouhlel, Jimmy Kopke, and Vladimir Smakhtin of the UN University Institute of Water Environment and Health, and Mariam Mina of McMaster University, is available post-embargo at <https://inweh.unu.edu>

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