

Bottled and tap water compared

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It is safer. It is more pure and tastes better. These are a few of the common perceptions about bottled water. The fact is that expense is the major divider between municipal water and most bottled water.

“There is not much assurance that bottled water is better,” said Michael Smolen, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension water quality coordinator. “It’s in bottles; it’s expensive.”

Consumers may spend \$2 or more for a bottle of water, when that same \$2 could purchase up to 1,000 gallons of tap water, which is used for more than just drinking.

Many bottled water companies actually get their water from municipal water systems.

The fancy names on the bottles may lead consumers to believe that the water supply comes from a faraway mountain range or a national park or stream.

Smolen said the standards are the same for municipal water and bottled water but the testing and reporting requirements are very different.

“With bottled water, what you are depending on primarily is the reputation of the company that is bottling it,” he said. “With public water supplies, you have the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Environmental Quality and the local utility enforcing a strict testing and reporting system that alerts the public whenever the quality or safety is in question.”

Whereas the Food and Drug Administration requires annual testing of bottled water, the Environmental Protection Agency requires water utilities to test their water much more frequently. Large municipal water systems may be required to test every day.

“We have a highly protected public water supply with rules that make sure we hear about the violation of water standards,” said Smolen. “It goes in the newspaper and in the water bill, and people know about it.”

There is very little public oversight in the bottled water industry. The Food and Drug Administration and the bottling company regulate bottled water as a food, based on truth in labeling.

Labeling is very important to bottled water. If the label says “spring water,” its source must be a spring. If it says “well water,” it must be a groundwater source. But if it says “drinking water” or “distilled water,” it can be from any source, and is most usually from the tap of a large municipal water system.

Most bottling companies will use various methods to remove minerals and organics from their water. The product is then disinfected with ozone or ultraviolet light as the disinfectants leave no residue or taste. A company's recognizable taste will come from a recipe of minerals and salts.

Municipal waters generally have the taste of the local waters because all minerals are not removed. Treatment and testing assure the water meets health and safety standards, while disinfection is usually achieved by adding chlorine, which leaves a distinct taste.

Also, many municipal water utilities add fluoride to provide protection to teeth. Fluoride is not present in bottled waters unless indicated on the label.