

Monday June 30, 03:02 AM

Bottled water debate hits a boiling point



WASHINGTON (AFP) - A debate over water is boiling over in the United States and elsewhere amid growing environmental concerns about bottled water and questions about safety of tap water.

The US Conference of Mayors in June passed a resolution calling for a phasing out of bottled water by municipalities and promotion of the importance of public water supplies.

While largely symbolic, the vote highlighted a growing movement opposing regular use of bottled water because of its plastic waste and energy costs to transport drinking supplies.

Janet Larsen, director of research at the Earth Policy Institute, cites a "backlash against bottled water as more people are realizing what they get out of the bottles is not any better than what they get out of the faucet."

The Pacific Institute, a California think tank on sustainability issues, contends that producing bottles for US water consumption required the equivalent of more than 17 million barrels of oil in 2006, not including the energy for transportation.

The group says bottling water for Americans produces more than 2.5 million tons of carbon dioxide and consumes three liters of water for each liter of bottled water produced.

The debate in the US mirrors that taking place worldwide in places such as Paris; Liverpool, England; Florence, Italy; Vancouver, Canada. According to the EPI, the issue making waves among policymakers in locations including Denmark and New South Wales, Australia, among others.

The backlash comes even amid surging sales of bottled water in the United States. Some of this is linked to concerns about contamination of public water supplies, although critics of the industry say marketing hype is a greater factor.

Aficionados of Evian from France or Fiji from the South Pacific swear by the taste and health benefits of those waters, but others decry the high cost of energy for a product that may not be any better than local water.

A Natural Resources Defense Council concluded that "most of the tested waters were found to be of high quality (but) some brands were contaminated."

The group said bottled waters "are subject to less rigorous testing and purity standards than those which apply to city tap water."

In fact, says the group "about one-fourth of bottled water is actually bottled tap water" while government rules "allow bottlers to call their product 'spring water' even

though it may be brought to the surface using a pumped well, and it may be treated with chemicals."

Americans drank about 8.8 billion gallons (33 billion liters) of packaged water in 2007, or 15 percent of their total liquid intake, according to the Beverage Marketing Corp. Per capita bottled US water consumption is up to 29 gallons (109 liters) per year, from 20 gallons in 2002.

The US is the largest consumer of bottled water, but on a per capita basis it ranks far behind Italy, the leader which consumes nearly twice as much, and others such as the United Arab Emirates, Mexico and France.

Advocates of bottled water say the industry is being used as a scapegoat.

Kevin Keane of the American Beverage Association said the mayors' resolution was "just cynical politics. It's like being against rope until you need a lifeline."

Keane says the bottled water industry is needed for communities hit by floods or other natural disasters and compromised municipal water systems.

Bottled water "is convenient and a good tasting beverage, especially in this day when you have fewer water fountains and even when you have them, people are skeptical about using them."

Beyond questions of safety and environment, some activists say the bottled water industry is seizing a public resource.

In the northeast state of Maine, a battle is brewing over access to a large aquifer by Poland Spring, a large US bottler owned by Swiss-based Nestle.

"Nestle's water grab is ruining streams, ponds, wells and aquifers," said Judy Grant of the activist group Corporate Accountability.

"Nestle's practices are raising serious questions about who should be allowed to control water, our most essential resource, and to what end."

The mayors, meeting in Miami, approved a resolution proposed by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom along with 17 other large-city mayors to redirect taxpayer dollars from bottled water to other city services.

Joe Doss, president and chief executive of the International Bottled Water Association, an industry group based near Washington, said it was "unfortunate this is turning into a tap water versus bottled water debate."

Doss said most people drink both and that in many cases bottled water is a healthy replacement for sweetened or carbonated drinks.

The IBWA says the industry uses less than one percent of groundwater supplies and produces only a tiny fraction of greenhouse gases.

According to Doss, water bottles represent a tiny fraction of plastic waste that even if not recycled, and that any effort to improve recycling should cover all industries, not just bottled water.