

Time to tap back into water at source

WE DON'T miss the water when the cash runs dry. Bottled water, that is.

That refreshing news came recently as Nestle reported nearly a 5 per cent drop in bottled water sales in North America and Western Europe. That company bottles water under familiar names including Perrier and S. Pellegrino.

Pepsi and Coke reported declining or weakening bottled-water sales as well.

President of Pepsi's North American bottling group Rob King said recently: "In just a tough economic environment, one of the first things that a shopper can do is consume tap water as opposed to purchasing bottled water."

The sad part is that ending the bottled-water fad took a recession, when common sense should have kicked in long ago.

While some bottled water does come from the natural springs and mountain lakes depicted on the labels, most is just tap water – packaged and sold at enormous cost. Two years ago, the Earth Policy Institute estimated that each gallon of bottled water costs \$2.20 a litre to go from the groundwater to your lips. Each bottle of water kicks the environment twice, first with unnecessary plastic containers and then with the fuel that is burnt to transport it to your door, supermarket or vending machine.

This sham is so ridiculous that the US Government Accountability Office, which studied the issue for a House of Representatives committee, reported that the energy costs of delivering bottled water to a consumer in Los Angeles were 1100 to 2000 times more than the energy cost of tap water, depending on how far away the filled bottles travelled.

Nearly half of state officials around the US report that consumers believe bottled water is safer than tap water. This obviously cannot be true when the bottled water is tap water.

Yet, annual bottled-water consumption more than doubled between 1997 and 2007, from 50.7 litres a person to 110.9 litres. The Government Accountability Office found that in a review of 83 bottled-water labels, only one label contained limited water-quality or health information.

In one of the more outrageous examples of bottled-water scamming in California, the *Merced Sun-Star* reported in June how the Safeway supermarket chain turns Merced city water into an enormous profit.

"In Safeway's case," the newspaper reported, "they pay more than \$1000 a month for more than a million gallons of water. The retail cost for that much-purified bottled water at Safeway is just under \$3 million. Safeway would not say how much it costs them to produce their water."

Yet Safeway told the *Sun-Star*: "We are providing a product that did not exist previously."

Last I heard, water existed before bottles, and before Safeway. Thankfully, consumers are beginning to remember that, too.

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Boston Globe