

Ensure Consumers' Access to Bottled Water

Bottled water offers many important benefits—including portability, emergency applications, and convenience. The bottled water industry had been particularly valuable during major crises, such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and other calamities. Nonetheless, recent attacks against bottled water by environmental activists threaten to undermine this industry and impede consumer freedom.

Some states have enacted regulations and taxes largely on the basis of unfounded claims about bottled water. For example, some environmental groups claim that most bottled water is simply re-bottled tap water. Yet only 25 percent of bottled water comes from municipal sources—the rest comes from springs and underground sources—and most of the municipal-source water undergoes extensive treatment before bottling that involves additional purification and other processing to improve flavor and quality.

In addition, all bottled water must meet specific standards before bottling, and unlike pipe delivery systems for tap water, sanitary packaging enables transport of bottled water with a very low risk of contamination. All bottled water must also meet Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations—most of which mirror

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) tap water regulations and some of which exceed those regulations. Accordingly, the EPA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend bottled water as a safer alternative to tap water for individuals with compromised immune systems.

Because of the hype, Congress may consider regulation of bottled water such as new labeling mandates. Yet most bottles of water contain information on water source. Consumers who care to do so can choose bottles with such information on the market, thus creating demand for specific types of labeling. Currently, FDA regulates the terminology to prevent fraudulent claims. Regulations requiring additional information are unlikely to change consumer purchasing habits and could simply increase confusion and costs.

Bottled water is popular with the public for its convenience, freshness, and healthfulness. Congress should not impose new regulations that will impede consumer choice and raise costs. Consumers who do not want to drink bottled water can choose other alternatives rather than regulate options for others.

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