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Bottled Water: Beneficial Industry or Super Con Job?

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Abstract Text:

The business of bottling water can be traced back to the late 1700s, when doctors in several European countries claimed benefits from drinking carbonated waters. Early records of bottled water use in the U.S. can also be traced to the same era for a similar reason--medical benefit claims from drinking special mineral waters. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, three of our first four presidents, were all known to have visited the natural spring waters of Sarasota Springs, NY in the late 1780s. One of the earliest drinking water scams in U.S. history was associated with water supposedly containing radon, bottled from mineral springs around the turn of the twentieth century. The U.S. bottled water industry actually declined throughout most of the twentieth century as we built some of the best public water treatment and distribution systems in the world. In 1975, bottled water barely existed in the United States and consisted primarily of home and office delivery of big recyclable jugs and grocery store sales of gallon jugs. No single-serve water bottles were successfully marketed in the U.S. until Perrier arrived from France in 1976. However, for a number of reasons, primarily associated with marketing schemes, bottled water's mass appeal grew rapidly and U.S. consumption of bottled water has more than doubled during each decade since the mid-1970s. We now consume more bottled water than any other country in the world. Annual sales of bottled water hit \$15 billion in the U.S. in 2006 with no end in sight for future growth. There are places for bottled water and definite benefits to drinking bottled water in place of a number of other beverages. But single-serve bottled water can now be found everywhere, and marketing strategies have duped many Americans into believing bottled water is far superior to tap water, when in fact, it is not. However, a backlash may be coming. During recent years, several consumer and environmental groups have begun to question why we spend so much money on a product that is not even essential, has growing ethical concerns, and has detrimental environmental impacts associated with energy consumption and waste disposal. Media groups and political leaders are beginning to take notice. Only time will tell if negative issues have any affect on this rapidly growing industry. The objectives of this presentation are to give an overview of the bottled water industry, compare bottled water to tap water, and make audiences more aware on the growing concerns associated with this booming industry.

Impact Statement: