

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO

# Breaking the Bottled Water Habit in Your Community



## What's the problem with bottled water?

It seems like everywhere we go, from meetings to community events, we're offered bottled water to drink. Across the country, free public water fountains have been edged out by vending machines selling water in single-use plastic containers. But clean, safe tap water is still the best option for staying hydrated—not only is it far cheaper than bottled water, but it's also more environmentally friendly. Bottled water creates a lot of waste, and the companies that sell it are profiting from an essential resource that should be accessible and affordable to all.

The good news is that more and more cities, towns, schools, and businesses are taking action to break the bottled water habit. At least **six U.S. states, 140 cities,** and dozens of **universities** and **national parks** have declared an end to spending on bottled water, saving millions of dollars and boosting public confidence in the tap. **Restaurants and cafeterias** across the country have pledged to stop serving bottled water in their establishments.

Campuses and communities have developed an array of strategies to decrease public dependence on bottled water and to encourage a return to the local tap. Tactics range from public media campaigns promoting safe municipal water, to installing water refilling stations, to adopting policies that ban the purchase or sale of bottled water outright.

Drinking water is a source of life, and we must stop viewing it as a commodity that can be bought, sold, and overused at will. By taking steps to embrace the tap and get bottled water out of our homes, schools, and workplaces, we can reduce the impacts on our environment and communities and build a better future together today.



## Did you know...?

- ▶ Americans drink more than **73 billion half-liter bottles** of water a year—enough to circle the globe over 370 times! About **77 percent** of empty PET bottles end up in our landfills, as litter in our oceans and waterways, or are incinerated, a process that releases toxic byproducts.
- ▶ Governments spend hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars a year on bottled water for state buildings and offices, and municipalities pay at least **\$98 million annually** to dispose of bottled water waste—funds that could be better spent on improving **neglected public water infrastructure**.
- ▶ Bottled water is not the pure, safe alternative to everyday tap water that marketers claim. In reality, the water that flows from your faucet is subject to stricter federal safety regulations, and independent testing of bottled water has identified a wide range of **bacterial and chemical contamination**.
- ▶ Bottles made from PET (polyethylene terephthalate, or plastic #1)—contain numerous chemical additives, including **90 potential contaminants** that can leach from the plastic into the water, especially when the bottles are heated (as in the trunks of our cars or in un-air-conditioned garages).
- ▶ In 2009, **almost half of all bottled water** sold in the U.S. came from municipal tap water supplies—essentially, the same water that flows from our faucets. It's amazing how easily we can be fooled by the mystique of "fancy" water originating from remote and pristine sources, as **this video** attests.
- ▶ In 2012, Americans spent **\$11.8 billion** on bottled water, wasting their money on a commodity that is nearly free to most residents. In a **comparison of average prices**, Food & Water Watch found that commercial bottled water cost between \$0.89 and \$8.26 per gallon, whereas tap water cost only \$0.002 per gallon—meaning that consumers are paying 240 to 10,000 times more for water that isn't any healthier or safer!

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## Key Steps

Ready to take action in your community?

Here are some key steps to get a campaign started:

**STEP 1 Find community members interested in breaking the bottled water habit.**

Identify people in your community (school, workplace, congregation, etc.) who are excited by the idea of reducing bottled water use and the associated waste. Talk to neighbors, friends, fellow students, and others, encourage them to get involved, and share your ideas on social media sites and community lists. Raise the idea in an open letter in your local newspaper, and assemble a working group of supporters to rally around the concept.



Over a dozen U.S. national parks have taken the visionary step to stop selling bottled water.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THINK OUTSIDE THE BOTTLE

## Did you know...?

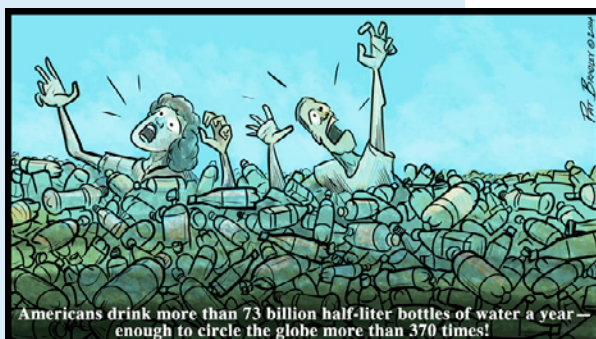
- ▶ To supply bottled water, big beverage companies like Nestlé often take water from municipal or underground sources that local people depend on for drinking water. Contracts allow the companies to extract as much as they want, regardless of drought or water shortage, and the local water district bears the responsibility for the well-being of the springs and the water infrastructure. It's a winning proposition for companies, but a [raw deal for communities](#).
- ▶ Meeting consumer demand for single-use plastic bottles requires large amounts of energy and generates toxic emissions and pollutants. The Pacific Institute estimates that manufacturing, producing, and transporting bottled water is **1,100 to 2,000 times as energy intensive** as treating and distributing tap water.

**STEP 2 Hold a meeting and designate a core team.**

At your first meeting, identify a core team to develop the campaign, and designate key roles, such as a policy expert, an outreach coordinator, a volunteer coordinator, and a researcher who can track down information on bottled water use your community (including who makes the key decisions about purchases or sales). Consider coordinating or joining with an existing group with related interests, such as a campus environmental group or workplace sustainability team.

**STEP 3 Establish a target and goals for your campaign.**

What are you hoping to achieve? Targets can range from simply raising awareness about the value and quality of public water, to soliciting pledges to phase out bottled water, to supporting policies to ban its sale or purchase. Do you want your institution to install filtered drinking water fountains or refilling stations? To reduce overall spending on bottled water? To terminate an ongoing contract with a beverage company? Also, consider the type of bottles you're targeting, from smaller single-use bottles made from PET plastic, to five-gallon "water cooler" jugs. Consider a phased approach, starting with small steps like awareness-raising and working toward broader policy change. Allow for flexibility: in some cases, such as emergencies, there may be a legitimate need for using bottled water.



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**STEP 4** Develop a timeline and messaging.

Depending on your goals, your campaign could move quickly, or it could be a long one. The recent [bottled water ban](#) in Concord, Massachusetts, resulted from a [three-year effort](#) by local activists. Consider your talking points: is your main motivation to reduce waste and pollution in local landfills? To protect people's health and the environment? To fight corporate takeover of public water systems and the commodification of water? Nail down your messaging and sound bites and create a Facebook page or website to lay out your arguments and post updates about the campaign.

**STEP 5** Get public support and buy-in.

If you're pushing for action at the municipal level, approach local businesses and event planners to see if they would support the initiative. At your workplace, distribute flyers and hold an informational meeting for staff about the campaign. On campus, rally fellow students around the idea and give class presentations. Educate people with articles, facts, [pictures](#), etc., and build your contact list. Use social media to invite colleagues, friends, and family to events, and tag them in photos and start discussions. For resources and models, check out Food & Water Watch's [Take Back the Tap](#), Corporate Accountability International's [Think Outside the Bottle](#), the Green Schools Alliance's [S.T.O.P. initiative](#), Canada's [Coalition for Bottled Water Free Communities](#), and [Ban the Bottle](#).

Specific ways to generate support for your campaign include:

- ▶ **Host a creative and fun public awareness party.** There are lots of ways to engage people around bottled water, from tabling and guest lectures to film screenings, flash mobs, rallies, and concerts. Organize an event for [Bottled Water-Free Day](#) (the second Thursday in March) or for [World Water Day](#) (March 22). Host a party at your house, lunch room, dorm room, or a local park and ask guests to sign a pledge/petition or to write letters/emails to higher-ups calling on them to take action. Build a "tower of consumption" or other [creative display](#) to demonstrate just how much plastic gets tossed daily. Distribute a survey or set up a [taste test](#) booth as a way to gather petition signatures (you'd be surprised how many people [prefer the taste of tap water](#)). Host or organize a screening of the films "[FLOW](#)," "[Tapped](#)," or "[Blue Gold](#)."
- ▶ **Develop a pledge to encourage folks to go bottled water-free.** When people sign their name to something, they'll generally read what they're signing, and many will take voluntary action to follow up on their commitment. Get a pledge from your legislators to encourage city employees to stop using single-serving bottled water at city offices, meetings, and events. Get [local restaurants](#) to [pledge](#) to voluntarily stop selling and serving bottled water. Examples of existing pledges to ditch bottled water include the [Tap Water Pledge](#), the [Think Outside the Bottle pledge](#), the [Take Back the Tap pledge](#), and [tappedthemovie.com](#)'s declaration page.
- ▶ **Host a bottled water-free event.** Demonstrate how easy it can be to shift the culture in favor of tap water. Work with institutional event coordinators to ensure that they provide reusable water pitchers, cups, and bottles at meetings and events. Purchase reusable jugs with pumps at your local hardware store and hook them up to the tap, and have volunteers on hand to refill them. Place a filtered-water pitcher in every fridge in your office or dorm. Get a checklist for taking action and learn more about ways to "[Free Your Event from Bottled Water](#)."
- ▶ **Launch a media campaign promoting the benefits of local tap water.** New York's "Celebrate the City's Clean Drinking Water Campaign" included ads in area newspapers highlighting the city's good water quality and supply. And a \$1 million advertising campaign by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in 2003 reminded residents of the safety and quality of local tap water. But you don't need a huge budget to tout the benefits of local water (check out UC Berkeley's [I Heart Tap Water](#) initiative). Request an [annual water quality report](#) from your municipal utility to verify local drinking water safety, and [learn how to read it](#).



ABOVE: Student activists at Mount Holyoke College. PHOTO COURTESY OF THINK OUTSIDE THE BOTTLE



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**STEP 6** Encourage the distribution and use of reusable bottles.

Encourage people to carry reusable water bottles as part of their daily routine. Get your university or workplace to include stainless steel bottles in orientation or welcome kits, as well as a map of nearby public water fountains. Approach local businesses—from grocery stores and construction offices to sports teams and big-box stores—to see if they are willing to donate safe reusable bottles with their logos that you can use as promotional or raffle items at your events. *Make it fun!* Host a contest for bringing in and using reusable bottles at work or school; see which department or team can truly “ban the bottle,” and provide the winners with a lunch party!

**STEP 7** Lobby for public water fountains and filling stations, and spread the word about existing ones.



Public drinking fountains in Portland, OR. PHOTO: FLICKR USER TPAPI

Convince your municipality or institution to install filtered water bottle filling stations or new public water fountains with a high arc for easy filling. If you’ve got a smart phone, use Food & Water Watch’s handy *Tap Buddy app* or the Pacific Institute’s *WeTap app* to find and share the locations of water fountains. Find out from your local water department if your municipality provides a free water tanker/trailer service

for special community events—if not, suggest it to them. At the same time, lobby for the removal of bottled water from vending machines, and for the termination of contracts with corporate suppliers.

**STEP 8** Push for formal policy change.

Get a real commitment in writing! Formal policies, including legislation, can provide an institutional mandate for reducing or eliminating the purchase of unnecessary bottled water, and help to ensure timely action and accountability. Getting the top people from your institution involved is key to any campaign:

- ▶ **At your school or workplace**, request a meeting with your president or vice president, catering manager, student body president, human resources manager, etc. Provide information, present your case, and ask for support in drafting a policy or ban, changing procurement practices, and/or installing refilling stations. If your institution has signed a beverage exclusivity contract, ask to see it and strategize on efforts to end it. Sell higher-ups on the idea that taking action on bottled water will be great for PR and make the institution a model of green leadership.
- ▶ **For K-12 schools**, get a school board member to introduce a motion to stop bottled water sales in vending machines and cafeterias, and to move toward a policy to phase out the sales on school property. Encourage schools to install refill stations and create bottled water-free zones and events (including walk-a-thons and outdoor events). Gather petition signatures from staff, students, and parents.
- ▶ **At a municipal level**, contact your mayor or city councilors and encourage them to promote local tap water at meetings and events, and to pass a resolution phasing out or banning the sale and purchase of bottled water (as in [Concord](#) and [San Francisco](#)). Call on public officials to cut taxpayer spending on bottled water and to support refilling stations and strong public water systems, and lobby for a **tax on bottled water** to fund public water fountains.

**STEP 9** Celebrate your successes, and don’t take no for an answer!

Continue to get people excited and involved, and celebrate your successes, especially if you’re encountering hurdles. Reach out to reporters, and send them announcements when your campaign hits a milestone. Document your efforts and share your stories with others. Host a community celebration to acknowledge your hard work and raise awareness of your efforts, so more people will want to become involved as you push for further action. Don’t be discouraged if things take longer than expected, and above all, remember to have fun with your efforts to #UnbottleWater!

## Learn More

Check out more of New Dream’s Unbottle Water Campaign, including a webinar about going bottled water-free on campus, a video on San Francisco’s bottled water ban, and more! Visit [www.newdream.org/unbottledwater](http://www.newdream.org/unbottledwater)

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