

Study: Bottled water no better than tap water

GENEVA (AP) — Despite perceptions that it's healthier, there is little difference between bottled water and tap water — apart from cost — a conservation group said Thursday.

"Bottled water may be no safer, or healthier, than tap water in many countries while selling for up to 1,000 times the price," the World Wildlife Fund said.

Bottled water is the fastest growing beverage industry in the world, worth up to \$22 billion a year, according to the fund.

A study commissioned by the fund found the "bottled water market is partly fueled by concerns over the safety of municipal water and by the marketing of many brands which portray them as being healthier than tap water."

The fund also said bottled water sales were rising because people were worried about pollution.

"Our attitudes toward tap water are being shaped by the pollution which is choking the rivers and streams," said the fund's water campaign director Richard Holland.

But the study — conducted by University of Geneva researcher Catherine Ferrier — said the only difference between some bottled water and tap water is that it is distributed in bottles rather than pipes.

But Stephen Kay, spokesman for the International Bottled Water Association, said the fund's criticism was misguided.

"The goals are laudable, and we agree totally that people have a right to clean drinking water," he told The Associated Press by telephone from Alexandria, Va. "But bottled water sales are a symptom of the problem, not the cause itself."

"The difference between bottled water and tap water is that bottled water's quality is consistent," he said.

But according to the fund, regulatory standards for European and U.S. tap water are tougher than those applied to the bottled water industry.

But Kay said this was not the case.

"Bottled water standards in the United States are at least as protective as those for tap water, and the industry is making a concerted effort to develop international standards," he said.

While agreeing bottled water may be safer in areas where tap water may be contaminated, the fund said boiled or filtered tap water is still a better option for people on a lower income.

Buying bottled water is "not a long term sustainable solution to securing access to healthy water. Protecting rivers will help ensure that tap water remains a service which delivers good quality drinking water for everyone at a fair price," according to the fund.

The group added that 1.5 million tons of plastic are used to bottle water every year. "Toxic chemicals can be released into the environment during the manufacture and disposal of bottles," it said.

But Kay said the industry was serious about recycling.

"We are committed to encouraging consumers to recycle, and to making our packing even more recyclable," he said.