

Contaminated Water by the Bottle

Bottled water, whose surging sales have been driven by a consumer thirst for purity, sometimes contains contaminants and is not necessarily cleaner or safer than tap water, according to a four-year study made public Tuesday by a national environmental group.

Testing 103 brands of bottled water, the Natural Resources Defense Council found that samples from one-third of the brands contained chemical or bacterial contamination exceeding industry or government guidelines.

While the study concluded "that most bottled water apparently is of good quality," it maintains that many brands don't match their pristine claims.

Bottled water "is of spotty quality," said Dr. Gina Solomon, senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council. "People are not always getting the purity they've paid for."

In conjunction with the study, the Environmental Law Foundation announced the filing of a lawsuit in San Francisco against eight bottled water companies doing business in California, accusing them of violating the state's false advertising and health and safety laws.

"It's not an acute health hazard that's the issue," said Laura McKinney of the law foundation. "The issue is these companies are claiming to be pristine and clean and natural, and they are violating standards in California and are profiting. This is an industry that needs to live up to its advertisements and statements."

Industry representatives quickly defended their product, saying there have been no confirmed reports in the United States of illness or disease linked to bottled water.

"Bottled water is extremely safe," said Cindy Yablonski of the International Bottled Water Assn.

Yablonski, whose organization represents companies that produce 85% of the bottled water sold in the United States, faulted the report for holding bottled water to a variety of industry and government standards, when, in fact, bottlers do meet existing federal regulations. "We believe they are very strict, adequate for the industry," she said.

The Natural Resources Defense Council strongly disagreed Tuesday, calling for a strengthening of federal bottled water standards, which are overseen by the Food and Drug Administration and are not as tough as federal regulations governing public tap water supplies.

The environmental group concluded that most of the water tested was relatively free of contamination and "therefore generally doesn't pose a health threat to healthy people."

But the organization also warned that the presence of certain types of bacteria in some samples might pose problems for vulnerable populations, including infants, the frail elderly and those with HIV and AIDS.