

# More expensive water isn't always better

By Douglas Rittmann

Guest columnist

Water issues remain crucial in this region, and not the least of these is taste. During water festival events held last October in Las Cruces and El Paso, there was an exhibit titled "Take the Taste Challenge." Students and adults were asked to determine the best water by taking a blind taste test of bottled water and local tap water.

The majority of the participants in Las Cruces picked bottled water as better tasting. On the other hand, in El Paso, the majority picked El Paso's tap water as better tasting than bottled water. Although the majority of participants in Las Cruces preferred the taste of bottled water, most were unwilling to pay the extra cost for bottled water.

Is it really fair to evaluate water quality based on a taste test? Polluted water could taste good or

bad depending upon its chemical content and the taste sensitivity of the person. However, much of the advertising by bottled-water producers would lead us to believe that good-tasting water must be healthier for you.

In addition, many consumers believe that paying much more for bottled water must be better for you than drinking cheap tap water. It should also be pointed out that most of the cost for bottled water is attributed to advertising, packaging, and delivery, which have nothing to do with improving water quality.

The 1999 National Resources Defense Council report, "Bottled Water: Pure Drink or Pure Hype," states that bottled water is not necessarily cleaner or safer than most tap water. The report is available at [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org).

The American Water Works Association called on the Food and Drug Administration to ensure public health by improving regula-

tory and monitoring standards for bottled-water products. Jack Hoffbuhr, Water Works executive director said, "From a public health standpoint, it is clear that bottled water should have the same rigorous testing and monitoring requirements as tap water does."

Because of the tremendous growth of the bottled-water industry, many public water utility professionals have become more sensitive to the taste concerns of its customers. In fact, El Paso Water Utilities reports that about 50 percent of its chemical cost is devoted to improving the aesthetics (taste) of the water for its customers. El Paso Water Utilities has also invested many millions of dollars in improving the taste of the water by installing 60-inch-deep granular activated carbon filter beds for final polishing of the water.

Granular activated carbon treatment is used at both El Paso water treatment plants. The Canal and

Jonathan Rogers plants remove musty tasting odors from Rio Grande water during the summer months. Although these odors are of algae origin, El Pasoans are especially sensitive to changes in the taste of water when the supply is switched from 100 percent well water in the fall and winter months to river water in the spring.

Even though less than 1 percent of the water produced is used for drinking, the El Paso Water Utilities' management feels that 100 percent of the water must taste good and meet drinking water standards. As far as I am concerned, I will happily drink the cheaper tap water and buy the bottled water when it is more convenient to use.

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