

Banning the Bottle



As usual, when we rang in the New Year last month, new rules and regulations took effect—including several concerning the sale of bottled water.

The battle over bottled water can be quite divisive. Its proponents argue that it is a convenient and healthy way to stay hydrated. Its detractors argue that it is expensive and leads to more waste in landfills.

The push against bottled water has resulted in several bans that took effect in January. The University of Vermont (UVM) enacted a new rule that ended the sale of single-serve bottles of water at the end of the month and mandated that one-third of the options in vending machines be “healthy.” According to the UVM website, these healthy options will include flavored water, fruit juices, low-fat dairy drinks, diet sodas and “flavored teas, fruit drinks and sports drinks with reduced calories” (opening us up to a whole other debate on whether diet drinks containing artificial sweeteners are truly healthy).

In an effort to provide students with drinking water options, the university will retrofit its water fountains into bottle-filling stations. According to UVM, these stations already are in use in the university’s student center, and it aims to have 75 stations across campus by the end of 2013.

Additionally, a whole municipality passed a ban on bottled water that went into effect Jan. 1. The town of Concord, Mass., approved an ordinance banning the sale of bottled water in sizes of 1 liter or less. According to NBC News, violators face fines of up to \$50 for multiple offenses. Based on news reports, it was unclear whether Concord would be installing drinking fountains or bottle-filling stations around the city.

These bans—especially the municipal ban—bring up multiple issues, not least of which is whether it is a government’s place to dictate the types and sizes of beverages citizens may buy and consume. Furthermore, these bans will not necessarily curb the use and purchase of bottled water overall—UVM students can easily buy bottled water outside of campus to bring to class with them, and Concord residents can simply drive to nearby towns to purchase bottled water (which could have economic effects for the city—according to a Patch.com report, a store owner in nearby Acton, Mass., said sales of bottled water have increased by up to 30% since the ban went into effect).

The International Bottled Water Assn. (IBWA) and other groups are fighting back, citing these arguments and more. IBWA has published several statements and recently released a YouTube video highlighting how bans can cause a “shift in consumption,” resulting in people opting for sugar-sweetened beverages when bottled water is not available. A local group, Concord Residents for Consumer Choice, has filed a petition to repeal the Concord law at a city council meeting this spring.

Despite these bans, bottled water is—and should be—here to stay. While bringing your own refillable bottle is often a more economical option, it is not always a feasible one, especially if no drinking fountains or bottle-filling stations are available (or if, like me, you often leave the bottle sitting on the kitchen counter when you rush out the door in the morning). In these cases, bottled water can be a lifesaver when trying to stay hydrated and healthy. The bottled water industry has worked hard in recent years to improve environmental impact and the public is well aware of the importance of recycling—helping to keep our drinking water options open and our environmental impact low.

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