

# Public water systems need commitment

By LIZA GRANDIA

Waterborne parasites? You name them — amoebas, giardia, worms, E. coli — I've had them. After about the 43rd intestinal infection during my four years working in rural Guatemala, I began to have fantasies about drinking clean water from the tap. When I flew home, I was awestruck by the free, clean, chilled water at public fountains stationed every hundred yards in the Hartsfield International Airport terminal.

Then I discovered the rage of bottled water sweeping the United States.

It's fascinating how in a few short years, Americans have come to find it culturally normal to drink our water out of plastic — and at prices higher than gasoline. The fashion industry is even selling designer bottled waters.

Over the past two decades, the worldwide market for bottled water has grown more than tenfold to an estimated \$22 billion a year. Compare that with the annual \$22 billion-\$25 billion that the United Nations estimates it would cost over the next decade to bring both safe water and sewage systems to the billion-plus people who lack these basic services.

Why do we spend our money on bottled water? Clever marketing tricks us into thinking that bottled water is healthier and worth the expense. The reality is that bottled water is often dirt-

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ier than tap water (and sometimes it is tap water!).

Bottled water is far less regulated and tested than municipal water. Inspections at private bottling sites may be as infrequent as once a year, whereas most municipal supplies are tested every day. And where do the 1.5 million tons of plastic used annually in water

bottles go? How many fossil fuels are consumed to manufacture and transport bottled water? And isn't it ironic that people will eat factory-farmed, chemical-laden fast food but insist on drinking bottled water?

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Mostly though, I am troubled by the class and civic issues raised by the bottled water phenomenon. If increasing numbers of Americans buy bottled water, then who is left to advocate for making sure our municipal water supplies are clean and secure? With the current threat of terrorist attacks, that's a question many are asking these days.

Where I worked in Guatemala, there is no local tax base to support a potable municipal water system for everyone. Those who are financially able can resort to individual solutions — either buying or boiling their water. Those who don't have the money for cooking fuel or home water delivery watch their children die of diarrhea.

To make matters worse, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are pressuring developing countries such as Guatemala to privatize their water utilities — which I fear will leave these services even less accessible to the poor.

Water privatization is also a threat in the United States. Nearly 90 percent of this country's municipal water systems are still publicly owned, but local governments, one by one, have begun contracting with private companies to run their water system. The city of Atlanta is among those.

Anticipating major water shortages in the near future and betting that this commodity will eventually be deregulated like electricity was in California, several major energy corporations (including the now infamous Enron) in the late 1990s began to make forays into the water business.

We must be vigilant of our right to water in this country and not allow it to be privatized little by little. It's wiser to invest our money in tax-supported municipal water systems that are accountable to citizen oversight than handing it over to private water companies who are ultimately only accountable (or, in the case of Enron, not accountable) to their shareholders. We need collective, not individual, solutions for the basic human need of access to clean and plentiful water.

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