

Quenching Their Enormous Thirst?

BEVERAGE PURVEYORS TALK ABOUT CUTTING WATER USAGE, BUT IS IT REALLY ANYTHING MORE THAN LIP SERVICE?

Story by Matt Chapuran

How much water does it take to get that cup of coffee into your hands? Maybe two cups used in production for every one cup?

Try 31 gallons of water or, as estimated by the Water Footprint Network, 1,100 drops of water for every drop that winds up in your cup. And before you next quench your thirst by grabbing a cold one, know that the Water Footprint Network estimates that one glass of beer costs 16 gallons. “One glass contains about (8.5 oz.) of beer. Most of the water behind the beer is for producing the barley,” the Water Footprint Network says on its Website.

Now that the concept of the carbon footprint has comfortably entered the lexicon, some scientists and activists feel it’s time to turn our attention to the so-called water footprint — and some very large corporations are taking notice.

A Dutch non-profit with a two-person board of directors, but supervisory and advisory councils that draw from World Wildlife Fund (WWF) International, UNESCO and university scholars, the Water Footprint Network is the brainchild of Arjen Hoekstra. The Network tracks not only the direct use of water, but also the indirect usage, such as the creation of packaging, that drains existing water tables. As the WFN says, “Many countries have significantly externalized their water footprint,

importing water-intensive goods from elsewhere. This puts pressure on the water resources in the exporting regions, where too often mechanisms for wise water governance and conservation are lacking.” Working at UNESCO-IHE and later the University of Twente, the Netherlands, Hoekstra developed the analytical tools to calculate the water footprint of popular household products.

Big Beer and Soda

Either as a means of bolstering public relations, or to preserve a key asset in their own industrial processes, many of the biggest players in consumer drinks are taking steps to lessen their water footprint.

MillerCoors boasts of its partnership with The Nature Conservancy, one of five partners in The Alliance for Water Stewardship, “a global platform for the development of standards for water stewardship that will enable fair and sustainable management of freshwater resources,” as stated on the Alliance’s Website.

With The Nature Conservancy, MillerCoors is seeking to help barley farmers in Idaho increase the efficiency of their irrigation. Additionally, MillerCoors points to a variety of methods to reduce their environmental impact, including reducing packaging and waste at their factories and employing stingy use of resources in packaging. “By reducing the size of our aluminum can ends, we’ve saved 10.4 million pounds of aluminum and





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\$10.1 million dollars,” MillerCoors says on its Website. “Today, our 12-pack bottle folding cartons use 11 percent less cardboard than in past years, which means we’re saving the equivalent of 20,700 trees a year.”

In partnership with The River Network, MillerCoors is also financing several environmental initiatives, including water management solutions in Columbus, Ohio, watershed protection in Franklin, N.C., water quality monitoring in Milwaukee, Wis., and mercury contamination monitoring in Statesboro, Ga.

Another member of The Alliance for Water Stewardship, The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has a similar project underway with The Coca-Cola Company. Working in areas as diverse as the Mesoamerican Reef, the Danube and the Yangtze, the two partners hope to conserve freshwater river basins, improve Coca-Cola’s water use and focus on reducing the water usage for sugar and other agricultural products. As the WWF’s Website (www.worldwildlife.org/water/cocacola) notes, The Coca-Cola Company relies not just on water to make its drinks, but also other water-reliant products such as sugar, citrus and coffee. Says Coca-Cola Chairman and CEO E. Neville Isdell, “Our goal is to replace every drop of water we use in our beverages and their production. For us that means reducing the amount of water used to produce our beverages, recycling water used for manufacturing processes so it can be returned safely to the environment, and replenishing water in communities and nature through locally relevant projects.”

Here’s the Rub

Coke has identified more than \$20 million that it will invest in the program, with an underlying goal of reducing its water usage by 11 billion gallons in 2012. However, by its own admission, “Water use is expected to increase as the business grows.” The company estimates that in 2006, 64 billion gallons of water were used for beverage production. But for Mark Hays, senior researcher for Corporate

Accountability in Washington, the problem with Coke isn’t just the soft drinks; it’s the water that it sells, as well.

Hays points out that the bottled water industry has tripled in just more than a decade to an \$11 billion domestic enterprise. “We’re concerned that in exploiting water, companies are also undermining value in public water systems.” While Hays is willing to acknowledge that some efforts made by Coke in promoting environmental awareness have some merit, he maintains that these partnerships neglect essential underlining issues. His contention is that the money Coke and other water bottlers spend on marketing help erode the public trust in tap water, leading to a situation where public indifference to this natural resource and its infrastructure allows large industry to dictate water priorities.

By way of example, Hays cites a recent situation where he asserts that residents of Atlanta were requested (in some cases required) to curtail domestic water usage — restrictions that were not imposed at the same scale upon nearby industrial Coke operations. “People were stockpiling drinking water for fear it wouldn’t be available,” Hays says.

“Meanwhile, the bottling plants were still running full steam. They shut down the decorative fountains outside the plants and pointed to conservation measures they’d already taken throughout their manufacturing process, but they were still essentially bottling water from a municipal system. When we need to make tough decisions, we need to respect people’s basic right to have water.”

Hays criticizes an industry that unlike soft drinks or beer, which utilize water as a key ingredient, instead “takes the water from the ground or from the tap and sells it back to us as water. Not as a key ingredient, but as *the* ingredient.”

“Water should be treated as part of a public trust,” he says. “People should be allowed to participate at a local level.”

As part of their ‘think outside the bottle’ campaign, Hays and his organization ask people to reach out to local officials, affirming the importance of local water as a key natural resource, asking politicians to prioritize investment in local water systems and calling on mayors to “walk the walk” by cutting unnecessary spending on bottled water through city facilities and providing alternatives, such as reusable bottles or refurbished water fountains, instead. 📌



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