

Bottled Water Ban: The unintended consequence story goes on

California bottles it on recycling, minimum wage

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It seems I've spent a lifetime writing about government responding to activist pressures that generate classic cases of unintended consequences. The most recent example was the Congressional Budget Office analysis of passing a \$15 federal minimum wage. The unintended consequence? As many as 3.7 million jobs destroyed in addition to the ones being eliminated by the bright bulbs in several state legislatures who have already passed a \$15 wage mandate.

Think about the effect on our youth. The 1,500 kids who drop out of high school every day face an expanding job desert. No one is interested in training them at 15 bucks an hour. If you don't find work at 16 or 17, what's the chance you will at 18 or 19?

The latest example I've seen of an unintended consequence is last week's plastic water bottle ban in the San Francisco Airport. The same ban mentality is brewing in several state legislatures.

Doing some basic math tells you that more than 25 billion (that's a "B") of these single-use bottles were recycled in 2017. Some are reincarnated in a second or third life as a bottle. Some become park benches, carpet fibers, decking materials, doors and window frames.

But the important point is that aside from disaster relief, the available bottled water saves lives for those in cities like Flint and now Newark, where high levels of lead in the tap water are threatening the health of the city's residents.

If you think the anti-bottle consequence will only be felt in those cities, consider that a 2016 CNN report found 5,300 local water systems out of compliance with EPA safety standards for drinking water. Another group found in their survey of state and federal reports contaminants in tap water that were linked with brain and nervous system damage, hormonal disruption and an increased risk of cancer.

Perhaps you believe that a simple home filter will obviate those unintended consequences of having no bottled water handy. Not so fast.

In Newark, New Jersey, the city recently handed out 38,000 free water filters to reduce the amount of lead in their water. Earlier this month, the regional administrator for the EPA told the mayor of Newark: "we are unable at this time to assure Newark residents that their health is fully protected when drinking tap water filtered through these devices."

Instead, the EPA proposed that the city provide bottled water to residents "as soon as possible."

The issue appears to come from Newark's use of lead pipes, some of which are over 100 years old, to transport water. Around 10 million American homes and buildings receive water from service lines that are at least partially lead. Hopefully, they don't live in a jurisdiction looking to ban bottled water.

The hubbub about bottled water really comes down to litter and pollution. While 25 billion plastic bottles are recycled every year, most are not.

People have a social responsibility to recycle. But the success (or failure) of recycling is influenced by how easy it is to do — which brings us back to the minimum wage.

California has caused documented business closures given a \$15 mandated wage on labor-intensive small margin businesses. One of them is California's largest chain of recycling centers, RePlanet, which cited the rapidly increasing mandated wage when it announced closure of 300 locations this month.

The unintended consequence story goes on. If the government bans bottled water, what are the alternatives? Aluminum cans, glass bottles and water boxes (a new fad) are all more energy intensive in their production. They create more emissions in the manufacturing process than plastic bottles. They are also heavier, which means they require more energy to transport. And the plastic liners in many of the new water boxes are not easily recycled.

As for San Francisco's bottle ban, consider this: The city's tap water system is tested for chemicals called trihalomethanes, which are formed when disinfectants are added to water. The average level of these THMs are 60 times higher than the California state environmental agency's public health goals. Given that purified bottled water goes through a much more intensive purification process than tap, the city's bottle ban looks particularly wrong-headed. Especially so when you realize you can still buy soda, juices and teas in plastic bottles prior to boarding your flight.

It's a given that government policies are too often insensitive to their downstream effects. Even when aimed at legitimate goals, the cure is often worse than the disease.

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