

TAPPING INTO CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HEALTH RISKS IN MUNICIPAL WATER SUPPLIES

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WHY DID WE DO THIS RESEARCH?

Municipal drinking water systems in Canada undergo rigorous and frequent water quality testing and deliver high quality tap water to consumers. However, experts estimate that Canadians spend approximately \$590 million a year on bottled water. Consumer experiences with discolouration, sediment, and unpleasant smell or taste have led to the use of in-home filtration devices or bottled water. Additionally, high-profile contamination events — like Walkerton, Ontario (2000) and North Battleford, Saskatchewan (2001), as well as recurrent media reports on boil water advisories, have heightened public awareness of health risks.

This project tracked consumer perceptions of water quality and consumption choices in the Canadian context and examined trends over time and across regions in Canada.



WHAT DID WE DO?

A series of focus groups and surveys provided baseline and trend data on the experiences, perceptions and water consumption choices made by Canadians in geographically-representative households. Survey findings were compared across Canada over time, across regions, and based on respondent characteristics.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

Over Time: Consumer experience with taste and odor issues has decreased, while trust in their water supplier has increased over time. Consumption of tap water over bottled has also increased; consumers mainly purchase bottled water because of convenience. Consumers believed that businesses that worsen water quality should pay for treatment, but not households.

Across Regions: All regions saw decreases in taste and odor issues, especially Atlantic provinces; all regions also saw an increase in trust in their utility, especially the Western provinces. Residents of Ontario spent the most and Quebec the least on bottled water.

Respondent Characteristics: The number of households that boil water before use increased, especially among respondents with high school education. Women are more likely to distrust their water supplier than men; men are more likely to favour tax increases and user fees to pay for safe drinking water.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS?

There are some lingering health concerns about the quality of tap water that result in consumers boiling water and spending on tap water substitutes; likewise, consumer trust in water suppliers has risen over time but some mistrust still remains.

Consumers are willing to spend money to obtain tap water substitutes they believe are safe but some do not feel that consumers should pay for better municipal infrastructure. This disconnect has important implications for communicating the role of the water utility in ensuring safe tap water to the public.

Clear differences between regions and respondents demonstrate that utilities may need to develop a better understanding of their customers to make their messaging most effective.