

IBFAN Statement

Nestlé Water Scandals



The human right to safe drinking water was first recognised by the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council as part of binding international law in 2010. (UN, 2010)

Nestlé, the world's largest packaged food company, has faced decades of criticism and consumer boycotts over its human rights abuses. It is now in crisis. Its share price has dropped by over 30% since 2022,¹ and new CEO, Philipp Navratil is restructuring the company, arguing that Nestlé needs to 'change faster' to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving global market. The company is planning to axe 16,000 jobs over the next 2 years (5.8% of its 277,000 employees) spin off its global water and premium beverage brands into a stand-alone business and focus on products with the 'highest potential returns.'^{2 3 4} It has already sold its North American bottled water assets worth \$5billion⁵ and closed its infant formula manufacturing and research and development operations in Ireland.⁶

"When a company like Nestlé comes along and says, 'Pure Life is the answer, we're selling you your own ground water while nothing comes out of your faucets anymore or if it does it's undrinkable' – that's more than irresponsible, that's practically a criminal act."

Maude Barlow

Former UN chief advisor for water issues

Business media often blames increased costs, competitive markets etc rather than the reputational damage caused by its human rights abuses, that in the case of baby food marketing has earned the company the 'baby killer' label. 50-70% of its 2000 brand food and drink portfolio is deemed to be ultra-processed and unhealthy.⁸ It faces ongoing charges of child slavery.⁹ Its harmful impact on the environment (plastic pollution, intensive agriculture, risky technologies. mono-cropping, land-and sea-grabbing etc. This briefing focuses specifically on Nestlé's bottled water business and the outrage of communities who are impacted by Nestlé's over-bottling and its illegal use of unauthorised treatments.

While IBFAN shares the concerns about the erosion of workers' rights resulting from the job losses and restructuring, the Nestlé's story serves as a lesson for policy makers who let transnational corporations influence the policies. Nestlé promotes multi-stakeholder' partnerships – knowing that these arrangements increased access and opportunities to delay, undermine and weaken essential regulation.¹⁰ The Nestlé story shows that the economic 'benefits' for host countries can vanish overnight.

Harming Indigenous Peoples & Lands

Key issues

- **Exploitation of vulnerable populations:** During severe droughts, Nestlé's extraction, privatisation and resale of millions of litres of bottled water back to indigenous communities, poses an existential threat that undermines their human right to safe drinkable water. These are communities that have traditionally stewarded their ancestral lands.
- **The unequal access to water:** In British Columbia communities were required to restrict their water use, while Nestlé was permitted to continue extracting water at the same rate.
- **Disrespecting Indigenous Sovereignty and harming Mother Nature:** Leaders such as Makaša Looking Horse, state that Nestle disrespects water, the land and its people.¹¹
- **Environmental Degradation:** Nestlé's water extraction has been linked to declining water levels and damage to local ecosystems, impacting wildlife and traditional practices.

2000-2025

Nestlé has been involved in countless scandals concerning its water extraction practices, particularly in relation to Indigenous communities in Brazil, Mexico, Canada and the United States. At the core is the practice of extracting and commodifying local water considered sacred by indigenous communities. Targeting Indigenous communities is a moral, ethical, human rights, land rights and water rights issue. Reports highlight damage to lands and human health.

- In 2019, Indigenous peoples from **Brazil** and other countries met to build common strategies to oppose Nestlé's privatisation policies.
- In **Mexico**, Indigenous communities are fighting Nestlé and other corporations about the impact of privatisation on their water rights. Nestlé Mexico is reported to pay 2,600 pesos (\$127) per year for each water extraction but makes 494 times this amount when the bottled product is sold. Local people gain nothing but suffering from this profiteering.
- In **Canada** and the **United States**, there have been legal battles between Indigenous groups and Nestlé over the impact of their bottled water operations on water rights, environment, indigenous land use and health. Nestlé extracted millions of liters of water daily from aquifers beneath Six Nations' traditional territory near Elora and Aberfoyle, Ontario. During this time, thousands of Six Nations residents suffered from a lack of safe water and were forced to rely on bottled water, sometimes sold back to them by Nestlé. While in the United States, for decades, Nestlé (now BlueTriton Brands) bottled the water from a spring in Millard Canyon on the Morongo Band of Mission Indians' reservation in California.

Outcome

While Nestle extracts water for profit, local wells and rivers are reported to be drying up. The extraction of water has been directly linked to a lack of clean, safe drinking water for Indigenous communities, leading to health issues such as Hepatitis A, gastroenteritis, giardia lamblia and scabies. Resistance from Indigenous communities include protests, boycotts, blockade and legal actions against Nestle. In 2016 the Yakama

Nation and community groups protested a proposed Nestlé water bottling plant in Cascade Locks, Oregon. The grassroots opposition, which included protests and a hunger strike by Indigenous activists, ultimately led to the defeat of the bottling plan and the withdrawal of the proposal in 2017. In 2024, BlueTriton (formerly Nestle) announced it was exiting the bottled water business in Canada, because of the collective action of Indigenous activists. Indigenous groups have asserted their treaty rights to the land and water in the region, viewing Nestlé's operations as a threat to these rights and have led to heightened scrutiny and monitoring of Nestle. [12](#) [13](#) [14](#) [15](#) [16](#) [17](#) [18](#) [19](#) [20](#)

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Extraction of Water in Sensitive Regions

Key issues

- **Over-extraction:** Nestlé extraction at unsustainable rates, depleted local aquifers and harmed ecosystems in California, Oregon, and Michigan.
- **Exploitation of permits:** Nestle exploits loopholes in permits to extract more water than allowed.
- **Privatisation of public resources** impacts on communities' access to clean water.

2000-2021

Environmentalists and residents in California, Oregon, and Michigan claimed that Nestlé's bottling water extraction was unsustainable in water sensitive areas and that the company used expired permits in drought-prone regions

Outcome

In 2021 after investigation by the California Water Resources Control Board, the state issued a

cease and desist order to stop the company from siphoning spring water from the San Bernardino National Forest.^{36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47}

Exploiting the Global South

Key issues

- **Nestlé's Colonialist Agenda:** Extraction activities in Pakistan and Nigeria, contributed to water shortages and scarcity in communities, especially in areas where they operate factories and bottle water.
- **Exploitation:** Nestlé's activities are profitable for the company but leave millions in Pakistan and Nigeria without clean water. Communities that live closest to their water plants are reported to suffer the most.^{48 49}

2012-2019

- Published reports indicated that thousands of Pakistanis in the **Bhati Diwan village** were getting sick by being forced to drink contaminated dirty water, after Nestle drained their water supply for their bottled water. Residents claimed they were forced to use sludge water. Villagers reported that Nestlé's heavy extraction of groundwater for its bottled water brand, Pure Life, depleted their local water supply, which had been used for decades. Nestle was reported selling the extracted water back to villagers, while denying the citizens access to it.^{50 51 52}
- The *International Centre for Investigative Reporting* found that Nestlé contaminates the water supply of its host community in **Abuja, Nigeria**. The investigative report revealed that a Pure Life bottled water factory was discharging untreated waste water, causing severe environmental damage and contaminating a

stream that served as the local community's primary water source.⁵³

Outcomes

- In the **Pakistan case** children fell sick with waterborne diseases. Following protests from Pakistani villagers, Nestlé installed a filtration plant for the locals, which helped suppress immediate anger. However, this action did not address the larger issue of the aquifer's depletion.
- The Pakistan Government's response included a Supreme Court audit in 2018. The forensic audit found that Nestlé had extracted billions of liters of water between 2013 and 2017 without paying the government for it. The audit also revealed that approximately 43% of the extracted water was wasted during the filtration process. The audit highlighted legal loopholes and inadequate regulation of the bottled water industry by the Government.^{54 55 56}
- In **Nigeria** Nestlé's operations caused serious gully erosion and its unregulated discharge of wastewater destroyed farmlands and made roads impassable.^{57 58 59}

High Levels of Microplastic Contamination

Key issues

- **High microplastic concentration:** Scientists at the State University of New York found that one bottle of Nestlé Pure Life contained more than 10,000 plastic particles per liter. This was the highest single concentration of any brand in the study.
- **Widespread microplastic contamination:** The research found that 93% of the bottled water samples showed some sign of microplastic contamination.

2017-2022

Studies found that Nestlé's Pure Life bottled water contained among the highest levels of microplastic contamination of any brand tested and that bottled water had roughly twice as many microplastic particles as tap water.^{60 61 62}

Outcome

In response to the research findings, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced it would launch a review into the potential health risks of microplastics in drinking water, resulting in the 2019 WHO publication - 'Microplastics in drinking-water'.⁶³ This led to a follow-up WHO report published in 2022 - 'WHO Review of Dietary and Inhalation Exposure to Microplastics'.⁶⁴

Ecological Damage, Humanitarian Crisis Exploitation & Legal Action

Key issues

- **Permit controversy:** The Michigan water scandal involved Nestlé's efforts to increase its water withdrawal permit significantly, sparking opposition from environmental groups and local residents.
- **Environmental concerns:** Opponents argued that increased extraction could harm the Great Lakes ecosystem, impacting water levels and aquatic life.
- **Profiteering during humanitarian crisis:** Increased pumping of water during the Flint lead contamination crisis. Lead is a toxic heavy metal.
- **Corporate gain during a humanitarian crisis:** Activists highlighted the injustice of Nestlé making billions in profit from a public resource while the local government failed to provide safe, affordable water for its citizens.

- **Legal battles:** The controversy led to legal challenges and public protests, highlighting the debate over water rights and corporate responsibility.

2011-2025

In **Evart, Michigan**, Nestlé's water extraction operations drew criticism for allegedly depleting local watershed flows and wells. Nestlé's bottled water under the Ice Mountain brand, paid a yearly fee of just \$200 for a permit to pump hundreds of thousands of gallons of water per minute from aquifers in Evart, Michigan for their company's profit driven bottled water. In 2017, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) approved Nestlé's request to increase its water extraction from 250 to 400 gallons per minute. Just days after this permit was approved, the state of Michigan stopped providing free bottled water to Flint residents, whose communities were suffering from lead contamination in their water supply. The timing of these events was seen as a major injustice, further fueling public condemnation of Nestlé for profiting during a crisis. Nestlé's cheap access to high-quality water led to public outrage in Flint, where families paid some of the highest water bills in the US for water that was undrinkable and toxic. A long-running legal battle on Nestlé's environmental harm ensued.

Outcomes

- A court ordered major cuts to the company's pumping and required real-time monitoring. Nestlé was found to be primarily responsible for the ecological harm from over-extraction.
- Community activists in Flint called for a boycott of Nestlé, driven by outrage over Nestlé's profitable water extraction operations

in Michigan while Flint residents were left with toxic, expensive water.^{65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75}

Faecal Contamination, Illegal Water Treatment & Criminal Investigation

Key issues

- **Public health concerns:** Nestlé's illegal water treatment raised concerns about the safety and purity of Nestlé's French and Swiss mineral water products, leading to investigations and recalls.
- **Illegal water treatment:** Nestlé used UV filters and carbon filters to purify water, techniques prohibited under French regulations for mineral water.
- **Deception and cover-up:** Nestlé had concealed these practices from authorities for several years.
- **Admission of guilt:** In early 2024, Nestlé Waters France admitted to using illegal water treatment methods on its mineral water brands, including Perrier and Vittel.

2024-2025

Faecal contamination of Nestle bottled water was registered in March 10 2024. Reports in early 2024 by Le Monde and Radio France revealed that Nestlé had been illegally using unauthorised treatments on several of its "natural mineral water" brands, including Perrier, Vittel, and Contrex, in France for years.

Details of the fraud

- Natural mineral water is legally required to be pure at the source and cannot undergo disinfection.
- Nestlé admitted to using ultraviolet and activated carbon filters to purify its water after traces of bacteria and pesticides were

discovered at some of its spring sites.

- In a separate incident, Nestlé was forced to destroy at least two million bottles of Perrier after fecal bacteria were found in one of its wells following heavy rains.

Outcome

Nestlé's French water subsidiary is undergoing a criminal investigation for allegedly using illegal means to purify its mineral water. French health authorities told Nestlé Waters France to destroy all Perrier production from March 10 to 14 from one of its sources near Nîmes.

- Nestlé's illegal practices resulted in a €2 million settlement fine, and the company was investigated for deceptive marketing.
- The French Senate launched an inquiry, revealing that the government knew of the illegal practices since 2021 but covered up the information.^{76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83}

Record level of Microplastic Contamination Linked to Illegal Waste dumping

Key issues

- Prosecution of Nestle in France for illegally dumping plastic, glass, and demolition waste near its bottled water facilities.
- Contamination of water with microplastics.
- Potential fraudulent sales of mislabeled water products.
- Deception and cover-up with the French government reported to be involved in the scandal. A French Senate committee report in May 2025 accused the Macron administration of knowingly concealing Nestlé's illegal practices since 2021.

2025

- French investigators allegedly linked the microplastics contamination to four unauthorised plastic waste dumps in the Vosges region containing a large amount of plastic waste, including discarded Nestlé bottles.
- In August 2025, French investigators reportedly uncovered record levels of microplastic contamination in Nestlé's bottled waters in France, specifically in the Contrex and Hépar brands. Tests carried out on the bottled waters found contamination levels up to 1.3 million times higher than those measured in surface waters such as rivers and lakes, and between five and nearly 3,000 times above the average found in groundwater worldwide. By comparison, many unpolluted water bodies contain only a handful of particles per cubic metre.

Outcome

The scandal intensified, with ongoing legal and regulatory scrutiny in France and potential broader investigations by the European Union. French regulators ordered the company to remove its filters and prove the purity of its water or risk losing its natural mineral water designation. Investigations into the illegal dumping have also uncovered separate cases of water contamination and potential fraudulent sales of mislabeled water products.^{84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94}

Analysis

Nestlé misleads consumers by selling its bottled water with idealised brands such as 'Pure Life' that are labelled as 'natural mineral water.' The products use the same disinfection treatments as municipal tap water but sell at 100 to 400 times the cost.

Call to Action

Nestlé Waters' (mineral water) management of its bottled water business demonstrates a recurring pattern of operation, that prioritises profit over environmental sustainability, regulatory compliance, and human health.

In the light of the concerns outlined in this briefing, IBFAN continues its call for consumers and institutions to adopt rigorous Conflict of Interest safeguards and refuse to accept offers of sponsorship from Nestlé and other corporations that undermine human rights to health and exacerbate environmental degradation. We also call on all to join IBFAN's decades long Boycott of Nestlé products.

Footnotes

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The International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) is a global coalition of over 300 civil society organisations working in 114 countries to protect maternal and infant and young child health from commercial misinformation. The high mortality of bottle-fed babies in the 1970s prompted shareholder actions, legal trials, a consumer boycott and a US Senate Hearing into the marketing activities of the baby food industry. A joint WHO/UNICEF meeting on infant and young child feeding in 1979 recommended an international code to regulate the marketing of baby feeding products. IBFAN has worked since then to help governments bring that Code into legislation to protect support and promote breastfeeding and optimal complementary feeding.



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