

The Press-Enterprise

Inland Southern California

Water bottles forever

GREEN: They last indefinitely if discarded. Recycled, they return as clothes and furniture.

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By DON THOMPSON / The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO - These days, millions of Americans rarely step out without a water bottle nearby.

The increased water consumption is healthy, doctors say. But the bottles aren't.

In 2003, more than 93 billion plastic water containers wound up in U.S. landfills. Laid end-to-end, that's enough bottles to:

Reach the moon and back 38 times;

Circle the equator 371 times;

Stretch the length of the world's longest river, the Nile, 2,222 times;

Line Interstate 80 from New York to San Francisco 3,196 times;

Span the length of California 11,556 times.

In just one month, health-conscious Californians toss about 100 million bottles into the trash, estimates the state's Department of Conservation.

That's enough plastic to provide shoppers with 48,000 fleece sweaters, 220,000 sweat-wicking T-shirts or 220,000 square feet of carpeting - all alternatives to putting the bottles in dumps, where the material lasts indefinitely.

Nationally, the clear plastic bottles dumped into landfills annually could provide enough fiberfill for 3.3 billion ski jackets or 546 million sleeping bags. Enough white plastic milk jugs are discarded to build at least 800,000 playground structures, 8 million 6-foot picnic tables, 15 million 6-foot park benches, or 40 million 24-inch-cube flower planters, estimates Arlington, Va.-based Container Recycling Institute.

California's Conservation Department offers shoppers an online national "green gift

guide" that it hopes will encourage consumers to not only recycle but to buy recycled products, spurring more use of recycled material by manufacturers. California is one of 10 states with a recycling program that requires consumers to pay a deposit on drink containers.

"It's part of closing a loop," said department Director Darryl Young. "We think the way to help manufacturers is to let consumers know these products are out there."

L.L. Bean now offers Adirondack chairs made from recycled plastic jugs, while Birkenstock Footprint Sandals Inc. offers socks and Petsmart sells a dog bed made from clear plastic recycled bottles.

Every fleece vest made by Point Beach Outdoors of Rising Sun, Ind., consumes about 26 plastic water bottles; every jacket or blanket about 50 bottles transformed into trademarked ECO Fleece, said Wayne Hartlich, who runs the firm with his wife.

All are showcased in the state's gift guide, along with tables, pillows, jewelry and glassware, even a kayak. The playgrounds, picnic tables and park benches also are included. The guide is at www.greengiftguide.com.

Nationwide, recycling of water bottles has dropped for seven consecutive years even as consumption has grown astronomically, according to the Container Recycling Institute. Four of every five water bottles goes into dumps, the institute says.