

March 11, 2005

PAGE ONE

For Finicky Drinkers, Water From the Tap Isn't Tasty Enough

**Jason Finds a Mountain River
With Liquid He Likes;
Dixie and Pepper Agree**

By **JIM CARLTON**
 Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
 March 11, 2005; Page A1

LAWSONVILLE, N.C. -- Bill and Rhonda Fels could never get their 3-year-old, Jason, to drink enough water, and he was chronically dehydrated as a result. So they were delighted when Jason finally found water he liked, from a glacier-fed river Mr. Fels crossed during a hike with Jason in the mountains.

Mr. Fels made regular trips to bring back more river water for Jason. When neighbors started mooching his supply for their own problem drinkers, Mr. Fels spotted a business opportunity and started a bottling company to sell the water.

Jason is now healthy and hydrated. As a bonus, he has stopped drinking from the toilet. The spaniel-retriever mix is now chief product tester for the Felses' company, Springmill Products Inc., which ships a line of bottled water called PetRefresh for finicky critters nationwide. From their new headquarters on a former tobacco farm in Lawsonville, N.C., the Felses sell their pet water for \$1.49 per 20-ounce plastic bottle.

CAST YOUR VOTE


1

Question of the Day: How much of the water that you drink comes from the tap? ²


People have developed a big thirst in recent years for bottled water, many of them because they don't like tap water. It seems their pets are no different, and entrepreneurs like the Felses are jumping in to serve the creatures.

A Wallace, Calif., company named Pawier Inc. pioneered the industry in 1990 with a vitamin-enriched water for dogs, which it has now replaced with a water-soluble vitamin supplement. Dog Ventures LLC of West Palm Beach, Fla., sells "DogWater" in containers that double as throwing toys. Then there's K9 Water Inc., a Valencia, Calif., start-up whose catalog lists products such as "Gutter Water" and chicken-flavored "Toilet Water."

"I came up with 'Toilet Water' because my dog would only drink out of the toilet," says Susan Goldberg, a 40-year-old accountant who started K9 in 2003 with an associate, Don Magier.

The Felses sell PetRefresh not only for dogs, but also for cats, birds and hamsters. They claim their water is healthier because it doesn't contain chlorine or fluoride. Those chemicals added to tap water can hurt animals' kidneys, urinary tracts and bones, they say. Tap water "also gives them bad breath, and causes

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit:
www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

hair loss," Mr. Fels says.

Some veterinarians question claims by Mr. Fels and other pet-water salesmen. "Aside from an Erin Brockovich situation, I'm not aware of any tap water being bad for pets," says Kim Nicholas, a vet in Renton, Wash. He says his yellow Labrador retriever, Sarah, imbibes from the toilet with no discernible consequences.



Bill Fels

It's also costly to slake a pet's thirst from bottles. With the average 60-pound dog drinking a liter of water a day, that's a roughly \$400-a-year habit at \$2.29 per 2-liter bottle of PetRefresh.

Pet-water purchasers say the investment is worth it for a pet that won't otherwise drink properly. Keris Eure, a Southern California artist, says her miniature pinscher Yenta was fading fast after diabetes soured the pooch on tap water. Ms. Eure discovered K9 water at a pet event near her home two years ago, and says Yenta has been slurping it up ever since. "It's such a relief," she says.

Pet preferences may have something to do with water's temperature. Toilet water is cooler and potentially "more refreshing" than water from a bowl, says Bill Burlingame, a veterinarian in Marysville, Wash. An unclean bowl may also offend a pet's sense of smell. "Do you like your glass washed after using it?" asks Dr. Burlingame. "Same thing."

Lori Loveless, a 41-year-old marketing executive from Tampa, Fla., says her cats Sassy, Myrna and Pepper would never drink much water out of the bowl they share. Instead, they sprint to guzzle water out of the faucet. Then she bought PetRefresh, and the cats were suddenly drinking from their bowl. "The reaction from my friends ranged from, 'Oh, please,' to, 'Where can I get some?'" says Ms. Loveless.

Kathy Dawson, a 40-year-old law clerk from Everett, Wash., became a convert after she offered PetRefresh to her hamster, Chester. The rodent hadn't drunk much water before. Now, she says, "I have never seen a hamster drink as much as he does."

Mr. Fels, 49, stumbled across his first pet-water source three years ago at the Carbon River on the flanks of Mt. Rainier in Washington state. There, Jason drank deeply for the first time Mr. Fels could remember. Mr. Fels filled several bottles to take home to nearby Everett.

Soon after, a friend named Gene Pittman took some of Jason's new water to his aged Chihuahua, Dixie. "I came back and told him, 'My 14-year-old acts like he's 8,'" recalls Mr. Pittman.

Quitting his computer consulting job, Mr. Fels went into business. He set up a small water-purification tank in a rented warehouse and drove a flatbed truck to the mountains to pump river water into a 300-gallon plastic container. He made 1,440 cold calls to veterinarians, pet shops and other potential pet-water retailers. There were few takers. His wife expressed misgivings over his business scheme. "I thought, 'Who is this man I married?'" recalls Mrs. Fels, a 42-year-old technical writer.

Undaunted, Mr. Fels began diversifying his product, introducing some flavored variations. "I was filleting a fish one day and an eyeball popped out," Mr. Fels recalls. "Jason gobbled it up and I said, 'Fish Flavor.'" "

His breakthrough came at the Cat Fanciers' Show, a breeder's event outside Seattle in early 2003, where cat owners mobbed his booth. They bought up his stock of 64 bottles and an



additional 200 his wife had to rush in. The Felses began advertising on the Internet, and sending mailings directly to licensed-pet owners. They say they went from filling about 1,300 bottles a month to more than 50,000 a month by the middle of last year.

With Washington state law limiting how much water Mr. Fels could take from the river, the couple decided to relocate to a state with higher limits. They thought they had found a promising source in Cottage Grove, Ore., a quaint town in a mountain valley. Jason nixed the move. "I just loved the town," recalls Mrs. Fels. "But Jason didn't like the water. I said, 'Please, please drink.' But he wouldn't."

They then looked to the water-rich hills of North Carolina, which they had once visited. They turned Jason loose in a plot they found on the Piedmont Plateau. He eagerly drank from five creeks and springs that percolate out of the wooded ground, so they bought the 40-acre plot. "If Jason doesn't like it, we can't even consider it," Mr. Fels says.

After suspending production for a few weeks to move, the Felses resumed operations. They recently introduced a new pet-water flavor, "Parsley-Chlorophyll," and hope to launch a new product called EquiFresh, a vitamin and mineral additive for horses' water buckets.

The couple says their water is safe for people, even though they label their product as "not for human consumption." Mr. Fels says the labeling is necessary to avoid strict regulations related to human health. In a recent sampling, unflavored PetRefresh served by Mrs. Fels in a chilled bottle tasted just like mountain spring water.

Write to Jim Carlton at jim.carlton@wsj.com³

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB111050376961976766,00.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <mailto:jim.carlton@wsj.com>



Patrick Conlon/WSJ

A bottled water being marketed for dogs, cats and other pets. Available flavors include beef and fish.

Copyright 2005 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.