

Nestle plan sets off water war

By Jason Blevins

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SALIDA — A plan to suck, truck and bottle Arkansas Valley spring water has residents here crusading against the world's largest food and beverage company.

"Nestle is seeking to drain the blood of Chaffee County," said Salida local Daniel Zettler during a fiery public hearing last week.

Nestle — with 12 U.S. brands of bottled water and almost \$4.3 billion in North American sales in 2007 — came calling for Arkansas Valley spring water about two years ago. The company wants to draw 65 million gallons a year from an aquifer feeding two freshwater springs near Nathrop, pipe it 5 miles to a truck stop and ship it 100 miles to a Denver bottling facility. It would be sold under the company's Arrowhead brand.

Nestle has promised to replace all the water it takes from the valley and spend \$1 million to restore riverside habitat where a dilapidated fishery sits. It has installed 10 monitoring wells to gauge the health of the underground aquifer that supplies the springs and will monitor wetlands near them.

Nestle hydrogeologist Bruce Lauerman calls the plan a "sustainable, surgical extraction" of water and describes preserving the pristine water supply by taking only a fraction of its flows.

"We are one of the best things that could happen to these springs," he said. "Our involvement affords a level of protection that other owners and users of this property could never offer."

Maybe so, say many locals. But no thanks.

"We have to take everything they are promising on faith," said Michele Riggio, who last week helped found the anti-Nestle group Chaffee County Citizens for Sustainability. "The risks are too great, and there are not enough proven benefits, so why try?"

To help change that attitude, Nestle is working with county residents to start a community foundation. There is also the lure of jobs and tax money. Construction of the \$4 million underground pipeline from the springs to proposed water silos at a truck stop on U.S. 285 would require about 50 workers. County officials also envision millions of dollars from property taxes and from the taxes truckers pay as they gas up.

"Chaffee County has a reputation in this state: Don't do anything there," said Frank McMurry, a 70-year-old fourth-generation rancher in Nathrop who supports Nestle. "We need to change that . . . and this could be our opportunity."

The county's planning and zoning board last month unanimously recommended approval — with about 10 conditions — of Nestle's special land use plan to build the pipeline and twin-silo loading station. The county must also approve a land-use permit application that allows it to weigh resource and wildlife protection, traffic issues and the county's general well-being.

Last Wednesday, Nestle paraded eight water engineers, lawyers, botanists and biologists before the Chaffee County Board of Commissioners in a five-hour presentation.

More than 150 residents packed Salida's historic SteamPlant Theater for the four-hour public comment period that followed. Boisterous applause followed each lectern-pounded exhortation against Nestle.

Many of the more than 35 speakers asked the board to delay a final decision and give the public more time to digest reams of studies and reports.

Many residents pointed to other places embroiled in conflicts with Nestle.

Last April, residents of Enumclaw, Wash., rallied to repel Nestle's plan to annually bottle million gallons of local spring water. Residents of McCloud, Calif., are in a five-year legal battle to stop Nestle's plans for a water-bottling plant. Residents in Maine, Michigan and New Hampshire also are challenging Nestle's plans to bottle their spring water.

"It's hard to anticipate all the scenarios, and Nestle has the ability to fight something for 20 years," said Jane Browning, who lives in Howard, southeast of Salida. "We don't have that ability."

A few residents at the meeting suggested the county bottle its own water and keep the benefits at home. Several spoke against adding 25 trucks each day to two-lane U.S. 285 between the county and Denver. Many wondered what would happen to the Nestle-tapped aquifer if a drought like the one in 2002 returned.

Several residents trumpeted a consultant's review of Nestle's research by Colorado State University ecologist Delia Malone — a review commissioned by the county and funded by Nestle as part of the county's permitting process.

While Nestle says the report "is not based on scientific evidence," Malone's review contradicts the company's research by suggesting that water withdrawal during a drought could drain the aquifer and nearby wells could run dry.

The report repeatedly criticizes the water bottler for not considering warming climate trends when studying wildlife, wetlands and the long-term ecological health of the aquifer, which catches drainage from the Mosquito Range.

"A lot of us are concerned about water here, and we are in an era where we have changes happening locally and globally that we've never seen before," said Salida local John Graham.