

## **Bottlemania**

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By [Elizabeth Royte](#)

In 2003, operatives for the Earth Liberation Front placed four incendiary devices inside a pump station in Michigan that supplied water to a Nestlé bottling plant. The devices failed to ignite, but ELF made its point: The substation was "stealing water," the group stated in a communique. Clean water, it continued, "is one of the most fundamental necessities, and no one can be allowed to privatize it, commodify it, and try and sell it back to us."

Is that what's happening at the Poland Spring plant in the town of Hollis? I'd come up here to see how the water gets out of the famous Maine woods and into the skinny bottles with the green labels. They are ubiquitous where I live. You can't walk a block in New York City without seeing a bottle in someone's hand, their baby stroller, or bike cage, spilling from the corner litter baskets or crushed flat and gray, ratlike, in the gutters. Nationwide, we discard 30-40 billion of these containers a year. The bottles, and the trucks that deliver them, are haunting me.

Poland Spring is the best-selling spring water in the nation, even in a city with some of the best tap water in the world. Everyone is drinking the stuff, and other waters like it. In the West, it's Arrowhead and Calistoga; in the South Central region, Ozarka; in the Midwest, Ice Mountain; in the mid-Atlantic, Deer Park; and in the Southeast, Zephyrhills--all owned by Nestlé, a company with estimated profits of \$7.46 billion in 2006. Pepsi and Coke are bottling water too, and making billions.

Why this turn against the tap? And how had we gotten to the point where activists are sneaking bombs into pump houses--infrastructure devoted not to oil, but water?

It isn't just Michigan: Citizens in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, California, New Hampshire, Texas, Florida, and, yes, even Maine, are in arms against groundwater pumping for bottling. Legal scholars are loudly debating water rights; the United Church of Canada has called for a North American boycott of the stuff, and so has a group called Food and Water Watch. The Franciscan Federation declared to the Environmental Protection Agency that access to safe and clean water is "a free gift from God," and the National Coalition of American Nuns adopted a resolution, in the fall of 2006, that asked members to avoid drinking bottled water unless absolutely necessary.

Their issue? Privatization of something so essential to life is immoral. An antiglobalization organization was traveling the country offering blind taste tests of bottled water vs. tap. Their point--tap is pretty good--never fails to make the news.

Still, every week a new bottled water--offering the stuff neat or with "beneficial" additives (vitamins, herbs, laxatives, nicotine, caffeine, oxygen, appetite suppressants, aspirin, skin enhancers or healing mantras)--hits the market. U.S. sales of bottled water leaped 170% between 1997 and 2006, from \$4 billion to \$10.8 billion. Globally, bottled water is a \$60-billion-a-year business. In 1987, U.S. per capita consumption of the stuff was 5.7 gallons; by 1997 it was 12.1 gallons; and in 2006, according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation, it was 27.6. Sales of bottled water have already surpassed sales of beer and milk in the United States, and by 2011 are, according to some analysts, expected to surpass soda, of which Americans drink more than 50 gallons per person a year.

I've come to Maine because it seems an unlikely battleground. The state receives about 43 inches of rain a year (about the same as other states in the region) and has a population of slightly more than 1 million, among whom Poland Spring is a familiar and once beloved face. The company has been bottling water from the town of Poland since 1845. Legal history recorded no objections when Hiram Ricker began to sell water from his family farm there, though a Portland newspaper, anticipating the nuns and the Canadians, scoffed at "selling something that God gave everyone for free." In recent years Poland Spring, which was bought by Perrier in 1980 and then Nestlé in 1992, has expanded its reach into other Maine aquifers, and the objections have been hard to miss.

The epicenter of Maine's water wars is Fryeburg, about an hour to the north of Hollis. "So what happened up there?" I ask Tom Brennan, natural resources manager for Nestlé Waters North America, for the third time. We're sitting at the conference table in the bottling plant, which was built atop a former potato farm. We had just heard an alarm out in the woods, but it turns out to have been an electronic glitch--a relief to everyone.

Brennan glances at me, and despite his efforts to stay on message, to stay upbeat, I can sense the man's fatigue. "Yeah," he says, with a downward cast of his eyes. "The infamous Fryeburg situation." He sighs. "It got complicated up there."

*This story was excerpted from Elizabeth Royte's most recent book, [Bottlemania: How Water Went on Sale and Why We Bought It](#).*