

## **Nestle Targets Aquifers and Springs in New England for Bottled Water**

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By Amy Vickers

Over a half-billion dollars of Massachusetts' taxpayer money will be spent this year on clean drinking water program loans to communities, yet Beacon Hill has been strangely silent about -- and invested not one penny in defense of -- small- and often low-income rural towns that stand alone against what many see as a threat to their drinking water supplies: Swiss-based Nestlé Waters.

Nestlé, the old candy company that once spawned an international boycott of its products for proffering cheap infant formula as better than mother's milk to women in developing countries, now profits from what many say is sullyng another sacred solution: the bottling of pristine waters. It may soon do this in some of the state's most water-stressed and fragile communities.

For more than a year, Nestlé and its well drillers, technical consultants, and lawyers have been quietly surveying the profit potential in the few remaining unspoiled springs and aquifers in Central and Western Massachusetts. In its attempts to strike blue20gold, the firm has aggressively pursued water extraction deals that have many locals seeing red.

Two recent efforts by Nestlé to pursue pumping operations in small towns illustrate why withdrawals for commercial water bottling operations in the state pose unacceptable risks, not only to local drinking water supplies, but also to such natural assets as fisheries and conservation land. Last summer, Montague residents halted -- at least for now -- Nestlé's pursuit of the spring water beneath Montague Plains, a state wildlife management area that also recharges critical ground water for a state fish hatchery and the local wells on which many homes and farms depend.

This spring, after considerable public outcry, Clinton town officials appeared to have finally rejected Nestlé's bid to extract and export up to a quarter-million gallons of spring water a day -- equal to 4 million servings of some of the cleanest drinking water in the state -- from the nearly 600-acre Wekepeke Reservation land that Clinton owns in the town of Sterling. The offer posed several legal issues, not least the fact that Clinton's 19th-century water rights to the Wekepeke are for surface water -- not spring water -- and only for town public water supply needs.

Clinton stopped using Wekepeke water in the 1960s and the town is now supplied by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority. Sterling residents, 70 percent of whom rely on the Wekepeke for ground water to supply their home wells, were in censed and asked why another town would have the right to

literally sell the water beneath their feet for global export to the highest bidder. Since when has Massachusetts enjoyed a surplus of pristine drinking water supplies that multinational firms, not Bay State citizens, are considered more deserving to receive? The state classifies 70 percent of state river drainage basins as "flow-stressed." Since when have they been restored to such good health that we now have a surfeit of naturally clean freshwater ready for shipping to bottle-chugging out-of-staters -- and this in an era in which we face unprecedented global warming, increased agricultural irrigation needs, and worsening water pollution, which requires skyrocketing treatment costs?

Leaders in government, business, religious, and spiritual movements across America are increasingly rejecting bottled water because of its indefensible environmental costs. It is time that this state also calls a halt to the aggressive intrusions of the bottled water industry into the vulnerable water sources that supply small-town homes, farms, and public conservation lands.

The legislature should place an immediate statewide moratorium of at least two years on new bottled water extractions along with a cap on existing withdrawals. In the meantime, an assessment of the state's available water supplies and needs -- coupled with long-term climate change forecasts -- must be made. Further, a statewide law must be enacted that affirms that the waters of Massachusetts shall be protected in perpetuity for its inhabitants, first and foremost, and that communities and aquifer protection areas may ban out-of-state water exports.

Unless it can be proven that Massachusetts has water to spare, there is no time to waste in stopping the bottled water industry from draining our most prized and irreplaceable sources of clean drinking water.

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