

Privatizing the Right to Life

It was at a Bioneers conference in Northern California in 2003 that I had a new awareness about the water bottling business hit me like a lightning bolt. I had dropped some of my business cards while stuffing change into my bag. A young man bent down to help me pick them up, noticed the cards, looked up and said, "We need your help." Five local officials in McCloud, CA had just sold Nestlé the rights to extract 1,250 gallons of water per minute from the aquifer at the base of Mount Shasta, for a tiny fee of \$350,000. One backroom deal, a couple days of rushed public review, and the world's largest food corporation secured access to this precious resource for the next 100 years.

Numerous local organizations responded to Nestlé's water-grab by banding together and buying back the waters and it was an exhausting battle. Now, once again, they are fighting off a bottling industry. The move by Crystal Geysers has infuriated environmentalists, local indigenous tribes, and residents of this city of 3,000, whose passion for saving this resource speaks volumes about their understanding of how these waters sustain the future of their ecosystems.

These waters around the 14,179-foot Mount Shasta are the source of much of California's drinking water. The cold, mineral-rich water bubbles up into numerous creeks, springs and tributaries of the Sacramento, McCloud and Klamath rivers. Much of it is captured behind 602-foot-tall Shasta Dam, which is part of the Central Valley Project, a huge federal system that provides water for fish, irrigation, drinking water and hydropower. Who is behind these water grabs?

Proponents of the deal argue that allowing more water bottling will be harmless and bring economic stimulus to this rural region. This *can* be true—when there is a good environmental impact study. Opponents, including the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, are skeptical given previous battles over water use. Residents of the nearby town of McCloud have not forgotten their bitter battle with Nestlé Waters several years ago. "There is no environmental impact review, no restrictions on groundwater extraction. Crystal Geysers has carte blanche to build as many buildings as they want," said local resident Vicki Gold in an interview with *The Willits News*.

Another example, Michigan's Osceola Township was recently sued by Nestlé for refusing to grant a permit for the construction of a booster station that would increase Nestlé's water consumption capacity from 250 gallons per minute to 400. Nestlé is paying only 200 a year for each well, they are the largest owners of water while nearby Flint and Detroit struggle with a dangerously bad public water supply. One can only imagine the profit Nestlé is making per bottle.

"When we're done, tap water will be relegated to showers and washing dishes" said one water bottling executive. He did not add, that this will ensure that people pay 1,000 times more for their domestic water.

Who is really behind this, the push to expand privatization rather than repair public water supply? Who wants the public to pay 1,000 times more for water?

Bottling companies have devised scare tactics to smear tap water as being contaminated. For example, Fiji Water launched a campaign in Cleveland featuring billboards insulting the city water supply: "The label says Fiji because it's not bottled in Cleveland". However, Cleveland's tap water consistently tested more contaminant-free than Fiji water—despite being less than one thousand times cheaper.

Water bottling is a profit-motivated business which avoids environmental oversight. Bottling plants are incredibly wasteful. Most statistics mentioned in public dialogue about bottled water only focus on the bottles—but the transportation of bottled water is harmful, too: the thousands of trucks moving in and out, day in and day out, shipping water in the most inefficient way possible. And the effects of the bottling industry on water tables themselves are real: water tables fall, creeks dry up, animals die or leave their homes, tree growth is stunted, and wetlands become lifeless. Water will become increasingly expensive as its demand expands and public supply dwindles further. The real discussion must be about human lives, and the ecosystems that rely on their waters.

All of this leads to an even more serious discussion about public-private partnerships compared to public-*public* partnerships. It has been well-established that public water supplies—owned by the public for the public and operated with transparency—beat out public-private partnerships when it comes to efficiency, cost savings, and equity. In other words, so-called public-private partnerships always put the "private" first. Although many cities in the US have a good water, the public is confused about water quality. Now many U.S. cities have significantly reduced public funding for public water supplies.

Switzerland, like many wealthy countries, has an excellent public water supply and wastewater treatment system. Apparently this has not influenced the Swiss company Nestlé, which has deep government support for its corporate takeover of the waters around the world. There is an even larger issue evolving under the surface—the worldwide acquisition of the world's water, which amounts to privatizing the right to life itself.

What consciousness is driving the privatization of water? In their quest for profit and control on a massive scale, banks and billionaires are buying water sources. These "water barons" are betting on water becoming worth its weight in gold. This commodification of water is a more serious direct threat to life on earth than the extraction of fossil fuels. By treating water as a commodity, they evade the obligation to understand water's role in creating and sustaining all life. They have misunderstood how we can all survive. This is in reality a form of genocide. These water barons are behind such companies as Nestlé, strategizing how to evade water regulations, getting in bed with world and local leaders. Switzerland sees Nestlé as creating a huge revenue for the country with a blind eye to the impacts on others. We are stuck in a mindset that says it is OK to do anything to make money: a colonization of others through owning their waters. It is not a "right" to own the right to life. Through systematic dishonesty,

they are attempting to sabotage incentives to build reliable processes and deliver good water to the public.

It is imperative to evolve a collective consciousness that water cannot be controlled for the sake of short-term profit or for the salvation of a few. We need policies and regulations on an international level that eliminate the hoarding of water supplies.

The waters belong to all the living systems on the earth. There is no other way to create a future.