

Nestlé presents new proposal at forum, hears public comment

By Charlie Unkefer

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McCloud, Calif. - Nestle's public forum was the highlight event in McCloud last Wednesday night, with 150 area residents filling the elementary school gym to hear company representatives outline the revised water bottling project proposal and to provide feedback and ask questions.

The meeting, which lasted over three hours with ample comments and questions, revealed a spectrum of opinions on the project proposal. The majority of those commenting expressed concerns over the project, even at its diminished levels.

Despite the long history of spirited meetings around the subject, there was a prevailing sense of order that was, in part, infused by forum moderator Joan Chaplick of MIG consulting, the public engagement firm hired by Nestle to facilitate the meeting.

While the overall order was seen as a substantial upgrade from the first forum managed by Kearns and West, crowd members freely and vehemently spoke their minds on what is still a divisive issue.

Some opponents of moving forward on a water bottling project in McCloud came as if ready for a rally, passing out printed materials at the door and carrying signs.

Speaking for Nestle were Brendan O'Rourke, the National Director of Natural Resources for Nestle, and Natural Resource Manager Dave Palais. They began the evening by outlining the key provisions of the new proposal and outlined the steps that they see in their company's process moving forward.

"We want to come out early with what we are thinking conceptually," said Palais, referring to past criticism that the company has not been forthright in the past.

"This is bricks and mortar stuff. We are not talking about negotiations with the district," said Dave Palais, referring to the fact that the presentation would focus on the project provisions and not the negotiation process with the district.

Currently, there is no contact negotiation process underway between Nestle and the district, though McCloud Community Service District directors have expressed an interest in seeking talks at a higher level.

Proposed project

Key elements of the new proposal include a reduction in the overall size of the facility from one million square feet to the current proposal of no more than 350,000 sq. feet and a maximum take of 600 acre-feet of water at a rate not to exceed 600 gallons per minute, as opposed to the original 1600 acre-feet and a 1250 gpm capacity.

Other key features include a reduction in truck traffic from 300 round trips per day maximum to 200, the reduction of employees at maximum buildout from 240 to 100 and the removal of Intake Spring from the list of possible water sources – remaining for consideration are Upper Elk and Lower Elk Springs.

The revised plan also indicates that it would not be relying on additional groundwater wells to run the facility.

Public comment

Comments and questions from the public revolved around multiple aspects of the proposal, including concerns over the environmental and hydrological impacts of the new project, the need for jobs in the McCloud community, Native American sacred site violation, Nestle's track record in other communities, truck traffic issues, the legal and procedural requirements of CEQA and NEPA and the baseline and ongoing studies they require, provisions for plant "build-out," and concerns over the use of plastic bottles.

Early in the forum, speakers queried Palais and O'Rourke about the ongoing lawsuits that Nestle has in other communities where they have water bottling plants, most notably in Fryeburg, Maine, and Mecosta, Michigan. Many residents spoke of the numerous lawsuits experienced by the company in other communities, encouraging other community members to investigate the record.

Many, like McCloud resident Ron Berryman, spoke on the issue of jobs and the economic climate of the community, citing that an industry that creates 100 jobs and contributes financially to the community is much needed.

This sentiment was furthered by former county supervisor Joan Smith, who noted, "The Economic Development Council is in support of this. The project actually has lots of supporters countywide." She spoke of the importance of developing a business friendly climate in the county.

Others, like McCloud resident Betsy Phair, questioned the two Nestle representatives about the quality and the quantity of jobs that will be offered by the company, stating that the figures appear to be inflated, questioning the company's claims around the number of people that would be employed at full buildout.

Residents Scott Oliver, Dianne Lowe and Debra Anderson addressed concerns over the amount of truck traffic that could be seen on Highway 89 as trucks either climb or descend Snowman Hill on the way to the facility.

Oliver noted that 110 round trips a day constitutes a substantial amount of traffic and it needs to be addressed.

For Debra Anderson, the issue of truck traffic revolved, in part, around the additional emissions expelled by the increased truck traffic. “We (the community of McCloud) are going to incur all of the costs of cancer and asthma (that are a result of the enhanced pollution).”

Louisa Navejas, Mark Miyoshi and Colleen Sisk-Franco, tribal representatives for the Winnemem Wintu, spoke of their staunch opposition to the project as a whole, citing concerns around the section 106 process, sacred site degradation, the impacts of aquifer depletion on the health of the watershed, and the ethical track record of the company. “You are so ignorant of tribal rights that it is disgusting to me,” said Sisk-Franco at one point in her commentary.

Some, like longtime McCloud resident Mary Baldy, expressed support for the plant, noting, “We had a lot more trucks and people back in the old days, and nobody seemed to mind then. I can’t understand (why people are so opposed to this). I think that Nestle has been very nice... Our town is drying up, don’t they see that?”

McCloud resident Dorris Dragseth reflected on the burden of increasing Service District fees. “We don’t have anything else,” she stated.

Norma Stone wondered, “Who is going to pay for our new water system?”

One more impassioned moment occurred when Lake County resident Rob Gross spoke of the possible impacts a Nestle bottling plant has had on a creek that runs through his nearby property. The creek, contends Gross, has gone dry because of Nestle’s nearby plant. “Fish are dying and you are just talking,” he stated emphatically.

O’Rourke, in response to Gross’s allegations, said, “The community where we operate should certainly hold us accountable.”

Still others focused on the procedural inconsistencies that appear to have plagued the contract negotiations all along, with resident Ray Angle noting, “They should have done the right thing five years ago. This is our space; these are our resources.”

After exploring many issues and concerns, the comment period closed shortly after 10 p.m. with both Palais and O’Rourke thanking the community for being respectful and allowing everyone the opportunity to speak.

“We are happy to see such a turnout and really appreciate the general civility of the meeting. It was probably one of the best yet,” said Palais.

In addition to allowing public comment at the forum, Nestle dispersed public comment cards as another way for people to register their comments on the project.

What's next?

Nestle plans on holding future public forums, with the next one tentatively scheduled for early May. The focus of that meeting will be on the studies currently being done on the Squaw Creek watershed.

The company also expressed its intentions to continue their watershed and habitat studies in preparation for a formal CEQA and NEPA review process and to engage in continued discussions with the MCSD Board.

McCloud Community Services Director Brian Stewart, reflecting on the meeting as a whole, stated, "The public is clearly concerned about Nestle's legal maneuverings in other communities and is demanding accountability."

"There is a real issue around trust when it comes to dealing with Nestle," continued Stewart, noting that since the original contact fell through, people have developed a wariness around the company. "It will take some time to heal those wounds."

Curtis Knight, director of the Mt. Shasta California Trout office, emphasized the importance of the ongoing study as a determiner of whether the project, as it is being outlined, is feasible. "I think it would be premature for Nestle to propose a new project at this point," he said.

However, Knight also noted that the evening provided a "good exchange of information" between the community and Nestle, characterizing it as an important step in an ongoing process.

Updated project information can be found at mccsloud.nestlewatersca.com or by phoning 1-866-9376.

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