

Businesses, watchdogs clash on water policies

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What do a computer company, an office chair manufacturer and a soft drink maker have in common?

Aside from dealing with the economic slump, all three firms - IBM, Steelcase and Coca-Cola - use vast amounts of water each year. And each is trying to learn to use less.

This week, leaders at some of the world's largest corporations are gathering in San Francisco to talk about dwindling freshwater supplies, gray-water recycling technologies and the risks of rising water costs. Among the attendees are Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, MillerCoors, Nestle Waters, Dean Foods, Cadbury, Cisco and Adobe.

"Water is the most critical ingredient for beverages we make around the world," said Lisa Manley, director of environmental communications for Coca-Cola. "But in doing business in 200 countries, we're also a local business. We know we can only be as sustainable as the communities where we're working because water is the No. 1 resource people need for health and economic prosperity."

Manley said the soda company is working on a global program that would return all of the 300 billion liters of water it uses each year back to local communities and the environment. But water watchdog groups compare such statements to greenwashing - the term used to describe companies that tout the eco-friendliness of products and services that may be quite the opposite.

"This constitutes 'bluewashing' when you get down to it," said Mark Schlosberg, spokesman for Food and Water Watch, a consumer advocacy group. "We welcome efforts to increase sustainable water use, but such discussions can't be led by the companies that are some of the biggest water abusers in the world."

Today, the group plans a news conference and a series of sidewalk skits that parody big corporations' use of a resource that is widely described as "the next oil."

The location for the protest and a two-day conference on water that drew not only big industry but government, nonprofits and the scientific community could not be more appropriate. With a continuing drought, crumbling water infrastructure, dying fish populations and hard questions about how water is divvied up, California is home to some of thorniest water supply dilemmas in the nation.

Although the food and beverage industry generally has not been an overwhelming part of the water debate in the state, pockets of controversy exist.

The Siskiyou County town of McCloud, for example, is embroiled in a bitter battle with Nestle Waters after the company several years ago proposed a 1 million-square-foot bottled-water facility that would have siphoned about 1,250 gallons per minute from tributaries feeding into the McCloud River. According to published reports, the company would have paid about \$350,000 to the local water district for a 100-year contract.

After protracted community resistance forced Nestle Water to pull out of the contract this summer, the company is asking the McCloud Community Services District to consider a scaled-down version of the plan that would pull about 600 gallons per minute from the waterways.

Environmentalists still question the impacts the project would have on the pristine landscape and an important feeder river to the nearby Shasta reservoir. But some local authorities see their rich water supply as a way to create jobs - an alluring prospect for a former lumber town whose economy relies mostly on tourism.

"There are people who say don't touch the water and leave the springs pristine," said Beth Steele, general manager for the services district. "While I understand the emotional reasons for that, it's not realistic in the state of California."