

## **New bill would give voters say in water sale: Poland Spring may soon acquire their water locally**

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By Laura Dolce

If Rep. Ed Legg's new bill becomes law, no public water utility in Maine will be able to sign off on a contract to sell a town's water commercially without first securing residents' approval.

The first-term Democratic legislator from Kennebunk said last summer's discussions between the Kennebunk Kennebunkport Wells Water District and Poland Springs' parent company, Nestlé, prompted him to propose the new legislation.

"I was as surprised as a lot of people that the Water District was giving serious consideration to signing a water extraction contract with Nestlé and that they could do it without any participation from anyone in the district," Legg said.

After meeting with members of Save Our Water and others opposed to the sale, Legg said it was clear that further steps were needed to protect the state's water.

"Water is a public domain resource," Legg said, "and it's imperative that voters be fully informed."

Norm Labbe, superintendent of the KKWWD, met with Legg about the bill Tuesday.

"There is some common ground with some tweaking," Labbe said, adding that both men agree that the customers' mandate should be followed. "We serve our customers, and of course if our customers don't want it, we won't do it."

Labbe said the KKWWD has no plans to try to enter into any sort of agreement without a clear public dialogue.

"We will not be moving forward unless we have extensive public input," he said.

Under Legg's newly proposed bill, LD No. 238, co-sponsored by Sen. Nancy Sullivan, D-Biddeford, and 18 other legislators, water utility companies would need to hold public hearings and have the measure pass a referendum vote before being able to enter into any contract to sell water.

Labbe said he and Legg have agreed that any vote would be limited to only customers of the district, since not all voters in the seven towns where water is provided would be affected by a potential sale.

"That would make it much more palatable," he said.

LD No. 238 will have a hearing before the Committee on Utilities and Energy on Feb. 10, and Legg said he's hoping it gets an "ought to pass" designation and moves one step closer to becoming a law.

Kennebunk resident and Save Our Water member Bill Grabin said he's planning to attend the hearing and that Legg's bill is "an excellent step in the right direction."

"That's my personal opinion," he said. "There are people in our group who want stronger steps taken ...; I think this is a straightforward first step."