

Bottled Water Industry Faces Growing Opposition: Last week's decision in York County may be part of a national backlash

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By Kevin Wack

Last week's decision by a York County water board to delay a vote on whether to sell municipal water to Nestle Corp., the owner of Poland Spring, did not happen in a vacuum.0630 11

* Last month in McCloud, Calif., after encountering opposition to what would have been the largest water bottling plant in the country, Nestle announced plans to significantly reduce the plant's size.

* Earlier this month in Enumclaw, Wash., the city council rejected a proposal to allow Nestle to build another such plant.

* And last Monday, the U.S. Conference of Mayors voted to phase out use of bottled water for municipal employees.

Across the country, opposition to bottled water is building, amid growing concerns about the industry's environmental impact and rising fears about private control of public water supplies.

"There's no question that there is a groundswell," said Ruth Caplan, coordinator of Defending Water for Life, a Washington, D.C.-based campaign that opposes the bottled water industry.

There are several reasons for the backlash to bottled water. Some of it is driven by fears about global warming - given the amount of oil needed to bottle and transport the water.

Some stems from concerns about the chemical makeup of plastic water bottles.

Some of the opposition is a byproduct of the huge price disparity between bottled water and the kind of water that comes from the tap for free.

Here in Maine, some of the local opposition to Poland Spring's operations has stemmed from the traffic generated by the trucks that transport the water.

Perhaps the biggest factor, though, is a fear that as bottled water becomes more popular, private corporations are gaining more control over a natural resource that is central to life.

"The fundamental issue is, who owns the water?" said Jim Olson, an attorney for Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation, which has been engaged in a legal

battle with Nestle. "If this company gets to do it, all companies get to do it, and you're not going to be able to say no in the future."

Caplan expressed concern that the bottled water industry is turning water into a commodity, the price of which will be determined by the market.

"What they're trying to do is get us to think that drinking water comes out of their bottles, and water to wash with comes out of the tap," she said.

Tom Brennan, a natural resources manager for Poland Spring, said the company's products are not in competition with tap water. And, he said, there's enough water in the ground for both uses.

Poland Spring hopes to draw as much as 250,000 gallons per day from the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Wells Water District, which uses up to 7 million gallons per day, and has recently found sources to provide an additional 3 million gallons each day.

"We're not depleting aquifers. That would be absolutely counterproductive," Brennan said.

He and other defenders of the industry note that soda and beer also require water, but they don't provoke the same opposition as bottled water.

Brennan acknowledged that opposition to the industry is growing, but he put it in the context of growth in the popularity of bottled water.

"To be quite honest, I don't pretend to understand it," Brennan said. "I think it's isolated, yet loud."

Poland Spring currently gets water from more than 20 wells in eight Maine communities, including Fryeburg, Denmark and Dallas Plantation. The company has bottling plants in Hollis and Poland Spring, and - in response to rising demand - plans to open a third plant in Kingfield.

In York County, the water district's recent decision to delay a vote on the Poland Spring deal followed a public meeting where more than 100 people expressed their opposition.

The water district's trustees voted to postpone their decision until after an independent scientific review of the data underlying the proposal.

Emily Posner, the state leader of Defending Water for Life, said she was heartened by the outpouring of opposition to the deal. She said that people from all over Maine came out to stand up against the corporate control of water.

Brennan, of Poland Spring, countered that many of the people protesting the deal are not from the Kennebunk area or even from Maine.

“And that in my mind is somewhat troubling,” he said.