

A water fight in Maine

Some are resisting Poland Spring's quest for more

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By Ryan Kost

SHAPLEIGH, Maine - Walk about 100 yards down a well-worn path, past wild berry bushes, and take a left into leafy growth. Just a few more feet into the green canopy, and there they are, jutting out from the earth.

"I don't even like the sight of them here," said Liz McMahon, a Shapleigh resident for 23 years, as she stared, frowning at the 3-foot-high rust-colored pipes.

These metal fingers are the source of a fierce debate that has gripped this small town and others across Maine, forcing residents to choose between Poland Spring - a company with a century-old history in the state - and their newfound environmental and social sensibilities.

For more than a hundred years, the company has drawn waters from Maine springs and marketed it to the world as just possibly "the best tasting water on earth." But now McMahon and others are part of a growing movement raising questions about the homegrown company's corporate parents - Nestlé Waters North America purchased it in 1992 - and the very concept of bottled water, which uses plastic and oil to deliver a product that many can get from their faucet.

As the company seeks to tap new springs, a number of towns have begun to push back against locating water-extraction sites on their land, forcing this quintessentially Maine company to consider the once unthinkable: looking to other states for its water.

"We're a Maine company," said Mark Dubois, Poland Spring's natural resource director. But if the industry continues to grow, he said, the company is going to need more water.

"We might have to force our hand," he said.

Later this month, Shapleigh residents will decide whether to put a moratorium on water pumping, which would freeze Poland Spring's plans to test the town's water. In Ogunquit, selectmen are considering a citizen petition they received in opposition to water extraction. Nearby Wells residents are set to vote in November on a 180-day moratorium, much like the one in Shapleigh, while they prepare an ordinance that would set ground rules for pumping.

But the issue is greater than extraction alone. Poland Spring, the nation's third-leading brand of bottled water, after Coca-Cola Co. and PepsiCo, is facing

mounting pressure on other fronts.

Take Back the Tap, a national organization that encourages people to eschew bottled water, recently launched a campaign in Portland.

Activists in Kennebunk are boycotting Poland Spring in protest against Nestlé, after the company tried to purchase water from the local water district for bottling. At a war protest in early August, organizer Jamilla El-Shafei asked participants not to bring Poland Spring water.

"There is definitely a movement afoot," El-Shafei said. "They're trying to corporatize and commodify water. . . . Water should be in the public trust."

The three pipes in Shapleigh were thrust into the ground a couple of years back, when Poland Spring was testing state-owned spring water as a possible source. The site was good - just the right minerals for just the right taste - but the state's asking price was not.

So, earlier this year, Poland Spring began eyeing town-owned land. McMahon and other residents who oppose the extraction site worry for a number of reasons. They worry that the increased truck traffic will be too much. They worry that a site would taint land where children play, adults hike, and neon-green caterpillars crawl. They worry the town is being scammed by a large, uncaring multinational company.

"Maine is sort of precious, so it really doesn't matter where they put the loading station or the pumping station," McMahon said.

Denise Carpenter, a lifelong resident of neighboring Newfield and a member of a group that opposes water extraction, worries that the cost could outweigh the benefits.

"I have lived here all my life," Carpenter said, swatting at bugs near the pipes. "I treat the earth well. . . . I just don't believe" Poland Spring when it says it will, too. The Poland Spring company began back in 1845, drawing water only from its namesake site. Today it draws water from seven sites across the state and employs about 800 Mainers.

At its Hollis bottling facility - the largest spring water-bottling plant in North America - bottles fly through the air along metal tracks. Machines fill them with water trucked in from across the state and pumped in from a source just down the road - a small slip of water where mosquitoes hunt.

Up the hill from that spring, hidden in picturesque stone cabins like the ones Poland Spring would like to put in Shapleigh, pumping stations draw water from the underground aquifer.

Spring water, Dubois said, is a renewable resource, one that gets replenished every time the clouds break open, rain falls to the ground, and the water seeps into underground reserves.

He dismissed many of the opponents' concerns as scare tactics courtesy of national environmental groups.

"I want to know where we have been a bad neighbor," Dubois said. "It's interesting that so few people can make so much noise."

But they are.

"It's definitely a big deal," said Michael Perro, chairman of the Shapleigh Board of Selectmen. "I would say that . . . it's going to be a very, very close vote."

Poland Spring has launched its own grass-roots campaign. There's the traditional stuff: ads in the local newspapers and presentations at town meetings. Then there's the untraditional: Mark Dubois's local blog and door-to-door visits. "A lot of our grass-roots effort is focused on 'What is it like to have Poland Spring in your town?' " Dubois said.

That effort landed at Art Ingersoll's front door in the form of a bottle of Poland Spring water.

"I don't drink it," said Ingersoll, a resident of Shapleigh for 12 years. "But it's sitting on my table."

On their way out of a local tavern, he and his friend Roger Gagne said they are still not sure what to think.

"I'm willing to keep an open mind and let them test," Ingersoll said. Gagne doesn't much mind them testing, either. "But I don't want to see them getting a contract we can't get out of."

Ingersoll looked at his friend. "Hypothetically speaking, if they said, 'We'd give \$1 million to the town each year for 30 years,' what would you say?"

Gagne paused. "I don't know."