

Corporations Want Virginia Water

I want to tell you a story about water, an unfolding story, occurring here in Rockbridge County, but happening at the same time in many other places in Virginia, West Virginia, and throughout Appalachia and the eastern US.

Nestle Waters of North America has recently announced that they have purchased an option to buy Big Spring, a 4000 gallon per minute spring 4 miles west of Lexington Virginia and ¼ mile from the Kerrs Creek exit of I-64.

They want to build a bottling plant of 1,000,000 square feet nearby, to be served by 300 trucks per day, to bottle the 1.4 million gallons of water they propose to extract from pipes.

The Nestle subsidiary is embarking on a 12 to 18 month investigation of the hydrology and geology to determine suitability. They have stated that the \$120 million project will mean 250 jobs paying from \$10 to \$18 per hour, and \$800,000 per year in county real estate taxes.

Fortune Magazine of May 2000 famously touted that “Water is the oil of the 21st century”. If so, this is our county’s wake up call to this new century.

The water deal has the all the earmarks of the Appalachian coal and timber exploitation stories: A markedly under-valued resource, extracted and exported by large corporate entities, in this case enriching a Swiss parent company, an array of minimum wage dead-end jobs, a crippled creek and a diminished Maury River.

But the heart of this matter is the water. The loss of the water in this watershed is difficult for the average person to fathom. Water is always thought of as renewable. It rains, the river flows. But once the extraction begins, the 1.4 million gallon daily deficit to the creek and the river will be, for all practical purposes, lost forever. And it will be a loss forever to everyone downstream in the James watershed. Ironically, the Lexington municipal water supply withdrawal point in the Maury River is also downstream.

1.4 million gallons a day is a large amount of water. All the 34,000 people living in this county, using 100 gallons per day per person for domestic consumption, cause less net loss to the watershed than the proposed Nestle withdrawal of 1.4 million gallons per day (2/3 to ¾ of this water goes back into the ground via septic tanks, or is treated and goes back into the river). Once the project is complete, the company will have leverage to increase the withdrawal rate if they choose, singing the tune that the plant will have to be shut down if it can’t be made larger. Other companies will vie for similar county water sources.

Upstream counties may have their share of water entrepreneurs, reducing local river flow. We speak of river death by degrees. And what better place to exploit water resources than in a region where drought is uncommon, rivers are many, and cows in June are hidden in the tall grass. To a fish in the river, lets say, feeling the effect of a pollutant, the result of removing a large, normally present, unadulterated spring water flow from the river is the equivalent of adding more pollutant. The dilution fails to occur. Water quality goes down. The TMDL hasn’t changed, but the biota has suffered.

Are the flows of other springs in Virginia being removed from other Virginia rivers? Is this something you or your group has an interest in? Let us know, please.

--Fred and Phyllis Fevrier, Rockbridge Co, Va. <mailto:fredf@cfw.com>