

N. California water-bottling plant's critics consider the source

By Lee
Romney

Siskiyou County officials were effusive in 2013 when Crystal Geysers' chief executive announced outside an idled bottling plant here that it would soon be churning out sparkling water, teas and flavored beverages.

A onetime logging haven, this northern county had long been burdened by high unemployment, and the company's purchase of the plant just outside the town limits would bring jobs.

But this is not the old Mount Shasta. A steady influx of outdoors enthusiasts, spiritual seekers and urban retirees has arrived in recent decades, drawn to the beauty and power of the 14,180-foot mountain that looms to the east.

The glacier-studded stratovolcano is the source of much of California's water. Snowmelt percolates through fractured rock to burst forth in clear cold springs below before making its way to Shasta Lake, which holds about 40% of the federal Central Valley Project's stored supply.

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To many who learned of the "politician-studded" event from the local paper, it didn't sit right that they'd had no say.

The plant faces no cap on what it can pump. Its deep production well is surrounded by homes that rely on shallower ones, some of which, residents maintain, were compromised when Coca-Cola's water bottling operation — and Dannon's before that — was pumping.

Residents raised questions about noise, truck traffic and the environmental hazards of plastic bottles. Mostly, they believed the mountain's resource was better shared by all, not exported for profit.

County and city officials say they have no legal authority to require an environmental impact report because the site was zoned for heavy industry when it was a lumber mill, and water bottling is a prior and permitted use.

Crystal Geysers representatives say they "share everyone's concerns for the future and have a vested interest in helping to preserve a safe and sustainable environment."

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But opposition has intensified in the fourth year of record-breaking drought that has shrunk the snowpack and strained the city's water system.

It comes as protests target commercial bottling operations elsewhere. Though the industry uses a relatively tiny proportion of California's water, the controversies have raised questions about local groundwater management in a state where regulation has been notoriously weak.

"We have never said the plant shouldn't open," said Bruce Hillman, 66, who with fellow resident Roslyn McCoy, 54, formed WATER — We Advocate Thorough Environmental Review. "We are saying we need to know what the effects will be so we can mitigate them."

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Dannon turned the former mill site into a water bottling plant in 2001. Though concerned citizens helped kill a proposal for a massive Nestle facility in nearby McCloud, the mood was dark when Coca-Cola packed up in 2010 and shed 42 jobs.

"From the second that we were aware that they were going to be shutting down operations, we were trying to figure out ways to replace that lost employment," said Tonya Dowse, executive director of the county's Economic Development Council.

Crystal Geysler, a California-based subsidiary of Japan's Otsuka Holdings, shares "the same values we do as a community," Dowse said, and is "a quality fit for us because of the resource availability."

Many here who agree remember the mill, which "used more water, had more trucks and made more noise than any of the bottling facilities," said Greg Plucker, the county's community development director.

"This is one of the best things that's happened in this town in a long time," said Ross Porterfield, an insurance agent and former city councilman. "We're looking for environmentally friendly business, and this is one."

Others are deeply worried.

62

After reading about the ribbon-cutting, Hillman and McCoy joined forces to push for a public evaluation of the project, poring over the California Environmental Quality Act.

Raven Stevens, the community liaison for the Gateway Neighborhood Assn., which abuts the plant, launched a study to monitor groundwater levels in residents' wells so any adverse effect from the plant would become apparent.

Members of the Winnemem Wintu tribe, whose origin story begins at Panther Spring on the mountain's flank, also joined the fight.

"I understand the county wants to bring in business," said Luisa Navejas, 69, who serves with her husband, Mark Miyoshi, 64, as a keeper of the tribe's sacred sites. "But you have to think about your future generations."

The drought has worsened public anxiety.

Panther Spring ran dry the last two years for the first time in tribal memory. The Mt. Shasta Ski Park, which draws crucial winter tourism, could not open. Output at Cold Springs, which feeds the city municipal system, dropped to record lows, forcing backup wells to run overtime last summer. Residents, who will soon get water meters, are being asked to sacrifice.

North of here, Joyce and Chester Kyle have also felt the drought's sting: A rancher renting their pasture hauled his cows away after the county water master shut off access to the Kyles' supply.

"Everybody's suffering, not just the people in the lower half of the state," said Joyce Kyle, 77. "Letting Crystal Geysler come in and draw down groundwater, it's not right."

Plucker said he understands that residents want a say, but the county's "hands are tied" unless the company seeks some kind of discretionary permit. Meanwhile, a city effort to launch an environmental impact report on the plant evaporated after a grant that it was linked to fell through.

"We're trying to make the best of a situation where we lost our legal leverage," said City Councilman Jeffrey Collings, who supports the plant but would like to see it fully vetted.

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The plant will first bottle sparkling water, later adding teas and flavored drinks, a Crystal Geyser representative said in written responses to questions. With one production line at capacity, it will draw an average of 115,000 gallons per day, less than 1% of Big Springs' output. A second production line will eventually boost that to 217,000 gallons per day.

Designed to meet top green building standards, the plant will rinse its plastic bottles with air, not water, and use a type of plastic softener that does not break down into phthalates, which have been shown to cause health problems, the company said.

It is slated to open later this year with 25 to 35 workers but will employ 60 with the first line at full capacity. Some will transfer in from other Crystal Geyser plants that are expected to close.

The plant will draw on Big Springs, which tumbles forth in a city park. The waters first journey for decades through complex cracks and lava tubes that are believed to connect to other springs.

Crystal Geyser's own monitoring of Big Springs Creek over the last year has found little change despite the drought, and experts retained by the company have confirmed "the sustainability of the water source," the representative said.

A new state law that calls for local regulation of groundwater basins in the coming years will not compel action here. State water officials call it not a basin but a "source area" of low priority.

I understand the county wants to bring in business. But you have to think about your future generations. - Luisa Navejas

But much about the watershed remains unknown. A regional plan for water management prepared in 2013 by local governments and advocacy groups said that the springs' ability to resist to drought remained an open question due to "poorly understood geology" and was "sorely in need of additional study."

"Our concerns are huge," said Curtis Knight, executive director of the nonprofit California Trout, which aims to restore the state's wild fish and waters. His message to Crystal Geyser: "If you say there's not going to be an impact, then you need to prove it. And if you have an impact, you're going to have to mitigate."

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The problem, he said, is there may not be a way to compel the company to do so.

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On a recent day, residents converged on Big Springs to fill reusable jugs with drinking water.

"We see the water tables dropping all over the place," said John Hawk, 77, a retired librarian. "If you pull that resource out, you'll see the impact on all of us. The wells will have to be dug deeper."

His concern is echoed elsewhere. Nestle Waters North America has come under fire for pumping from the San Bernardino National Forest on a decades-old permit, bottling from a declining aquifer near Cabazon, and tapping into Sacramento's municipal water supply. Starbucks, facing criticism for operating a water bottling plant in Merced, said Thursday it would shift production of Ethos Water to Pennsylvania.

62

Chris Hogan, spokesman for the Virginia-based International Bottled Water Assn., said dislike of the industry is driven by emotion, not fact. Industry research shows that it takes 1.32 liters of water to produce a liter of bottled water, a low ratio in the beverage industry. In California, he said, bottlers use just .02% of the state water supply. (Crystal Geyser said it uses just .00016%.)

Ellen Hanak, director of the Water Policy Center at the Public Policy Institute of California, agreed that reaction to the industry can seem disproportionate to its impact. Bottlers are no different than other commercial users, she said, and Crystal Geyser's maximum annual use estimates equal less than what it would take to irrigate 50 acres of alfalfa.

Rather than "arbitrarily deciding that one particular use ... is not good," she suggested, "it would be better to put in place a groundwater management plan, because who's to say that the combined uses aren't causing a problem?"

Indeed, while the new groundwater law does not require plans for low-priority areas, it "encourages and authorizes" local jurisdictions to make them.

Siskiyou County Supervisor Ed Valenzuela said further study of the aquifer might just prove the "silver lining" of the bitter controversy. Then, he said, "there could be an estimate of what can be reasonably taken away."

lee.romney@latimes.com

Twitter: [@leeromney](https://twitter.com/leeromney)

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