

Bottled water companies under fire amid California's drought

By Peter Hecht
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Environmental groups have long taken aim at bottled water companies for contributing to the glut of plastic bottles that clog landfills, streams and waterways.

Now, amid California's drought, they're looking at the water itself.

Groups such as Food & Water Watch, the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, are newly energized as California's historic drought is creating both an intense public policy debate and a torrent of protests over bottled water.

"Nestlé and other multinationals like Crystal Geyser are bottling the state's public resources and making private profit," said Adam Scow, Food & Water Watch's California director. "Everyone has a right to water – and bottled water is the most glaring example of egregious privatization."

In response, the bitter politics of water shortages are inspiring defensive public relations campaigns from bottled water companies. They are sending the message that crystal-clear bottles of Alpine Spring Water, Arrowhead or Pure Life aren't worsening California's water supply woes.

In a recent op-ed article in the San Bernardino Sun newspaper, Nestlé Waters North America CEO Tim Brown issued a rebuttal to critics of the company's practices. He said Nestlé operates five California bottling plants, using 705 million gallons of water per year. "To put that amount in perspective," Brown said, "this is roughly equal to the annual average watering needs of two California golf courses."

The state's four-year drought has stirred up some groups' wrath against agribusiness and growers of almonds and other water-thirsty crops. But some say bottled water corporations have become an easier target than pinning blame on individual farmers or others.

Food & Water Watch and other advocacy groups are targeting Nestlé for pulling spring water from the Cabazon basin beneath the San Bernardino Mountains in Southern California. They are attacking Crystal Geyser for plans to tap the bubbling resources of Big Springs beneath Mount Shasta in the north.

In early April, the liberal advocacy group Courage Campaign began an online petition demanding that the California Water Resources Control Board ban Nestlé from buying water from municipal or groundwater suppliers. The petition, which has collected 166,000 signatures so far, accuses Nestlé of "bottling the scarce resource straight from the heart of California's drought and selling it for a profit."

This week, Courage Campaign's executive director, Eddie Kurtz, took aim at Wal-Mart for selling bottled water that a partner, DS Services of America, purchases from Sacramento's municipal drinking supply.

"People in California are changing their behaviors and the way they use water," Kurtz said. "And yet you have these giant corporations, like Nestlé, like Wal-Mart, blithely going on like nothing is going on."

\$1

Amount per 100 cubic feet that Sacramento metered water users pay

But a state water official says it's not that simple. Felicia Marcus, chairman of the State Water Resources Control Board, said bottled water companies have the same entitlement to California water as other corporations and

consumers with legal water rights. “This is what happens in a crisis – everyone points to their favorite use they don’t like,” Marcus said in recent meeting with The Sacramento Bee editorial board.

City of Sacramento spokeswoman Rhea Serran said bottled water companies pay about \$1 per 100 cubic feet to purchase water from city supplies, the same metered rate as residential consumers, hospitals, manufacturers and other businesses. The city’s total water use is 31 billion gallons a year; of that, Nestlé said it bought 50 million gallons from the city last year. DS Services and Wal-Mart haven’t made public their water purchases.

Meanwhile, as Gov. Jerry Brown issued a recent executive order calling for 25 percent reductions in urban water use, bottled water companies insist they are not the cause of California’s water trouble.

50 million

Number of gallons Nestlé purchased from Sacramento city last year

“There are certainly groups that don’t like bottled water and our industry to start with,” said Chris Hogan, vice president of communications for the Alexandria, Va.-based International Bottled Water Association. “They find it to be an easy-to-digest target. We are water users, absolutely. But the fact is we use very little water to manufacture bottled water.”

The industry’s sensitivity over the recent criticism is evident in the prominently displayed “Bottled Water & California” fact sheet on the water association’s Web page.

55 million

Gallons that Nestlé says it will conserve this year with new California water-saving measures

Bottled water accounts for less than 0.01 percent of all water used in the United States and 0.02 percent of all water used in California, the association states. And it argues: “Put into context, in 2014, total annual U.S. bottled water consumption was 10.9 billion gallons. Los Angeles goes through that amount in tap water in a little over three weeks.”

Nestlé Waters North America gets water from 11 springs in California, the cities of Sacramento, Los Angeles, Livermore and Ontario, as well as from the Morongo Band of Mission Indians. The company says more than 80 percent of the water it bottles in California is consumed within the state.

On Tuesday, the Stamford, Conn.-based company issued a press release, promising drought-conservation measures that include an 8 percent cut in water use – a savings of 55 million gallons this year – at Nestlé’s five California bottling locations. It also announced plans to transform the company’s Modesto milk factory into a “zero water” factory, using recycled water from its condensed milk operation. According to the company, that means the plant will not use any local fresh water sources for its operations.

Madeline Baer, a San Diego State University professor specializing in politics, human rights and water policy, said bottled water companies will have a tough time courting public sympathy, no matter how small the percentage of California’s water they use or their pledges to conserve more.

“They’re pumping water from a desert ecosystem and they’re bottling it and selling it for a profit,” Baer said. “People bristle over the idea of private corporations owning and selling a resource that we can’t live without.”

While agriculture is a far more significant water user, she added, “A farmer who is using water-intensive measures ... is not as good a target as the Nestlé corporation.”

Last week, another major corporate brand, Starbucks, moved quickly to distance itself from the California bottled water controversy.

Since 2005, Starbucks has been marketing its own brand of bottled water, Ethos, by promising a share of the profits to address “the global humanitarian water crisis.” But the company came under fire in a recent Mother Jones magazine article for bottling water from private springs in Baxter, an unincorporated town in Placer County, amid the drought.

On May 7, Starbucks announced it would stop pulling water from California and move its bottled water production to Pennsylvania. “We are committed to our mission to be globally responsible and to support the people of the state of California as they face this unprecedented drought,” said John Kelly, the company’s senior vice president for global responsibility and public policy.

Meanwhile, Crystal Geyser is defending its plans to begin drawing 115,000 gallons of water a day from springs near Mount Shasta.

Judy Yee, executive vice president of the Calistoga-based company, said in a statement to The Bee that the company’s plans to bottle water at a nearby plant formerly operated by Coca-Cola “are sustainable and will not impact the environment.” She added: “During times of drought, all California manufacturers that use water in any capacity must adapt to conserve resources, just as we have done.”

But that didn’t satisfy bottled water critic Kurtz of the Courage Campaign.

“Crystal Geyser is opening a new water-bottling operation? That’s just mind-boggling tone deaf,” he said. “This is not the time to bottle more water in California. It’s time to stop bottling water in California.”

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