

Nestlé bottling water at the expense of communities



By Emma Lui

Every day, Nestlé, a multinational corporation whose operations include water bottling, draws millions of litres of water from aquifers in British Columbia and Ontario which it packages and sells for huge profits.

In October, I went to the site of the Middlebrook well with members of the local group Save Our Water who talked about how vulnerable the town of Elora, Ontario's drinking water supplies are. Elora, which is a community in the township of Centre Wellington, relies on three wells for drinking water. One well is stable but the other two wells are so vulnerable they cannot be pumped at the same time.

Two years ago, Nestlé bought the Middlebrook well on the edge of Elora despite Centre Wellington's own bid to buy the well in order to safeguard drinking water supplies for the community.

Nestlé's plans to pump 1.6 million litres from this well have been delayed by a temporary provincial moratorium on new and expanded bottled water permits. The moratorium was enacted in response to massive public pressure from Council of Canadians supporters and local groups such as Wellington Water Watchers and Save Our Water. The moratorium was extended in December. A public opinion poll commissioned by the Council of Canadians in November revealed that 82 per cent of respondents across Ontario said the provincial moratorium should be permanent.

The Ontario government should require Nestlé to sell the Middlebrook well to Centre Wellington as the township's population is expected to more than double in the next 25 years.

Six Nations of the Grand River is downstream from Nestlé's operations. *The Guardian* reported that "Ninety-one percent of the homes in this community aren't connected to the water treatment plant...Some...have no water at all. Others have water in their taps, but it is too polluted to drink."

Under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, governments are required to obtain free, prior and informed consent from Indigenous peoples for water projects like Nestlé's bottled water takings.

Six Nations youth and supporters organized a protest against Nestlé in November and ran to the Grand River for the Water Is Life Prayer Run. A bus then took people from Six Nations to Nestlé's plant in Aberfoyle. Many more people from the Guelph area joined to show support. Despite the rainy and damp weather, roughly 250 people gathered at the entrance of the plant to listen to speakers and express opposition to Nestlé's water grabs.

Wellington County is one of two places in Canada where Nestlé pumps water despite local opposition. Nestlé is also pumping water for bottling in British Columbia.

Despite repeated droughts in the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley, Nestlé continues to extract 300 million litres annually from a well in Hope, B.C. located on Stó:lo



territory. The well extracts water from an aquifer that 6,000 nearby residents rely on.

Bottled water exports from Canada to the U.S. have increased by 383 per cent since 2009. According to Statistics Canada, exports from B.C. to the U.S. have increased a staggering 5,951 per cent over the last decade.

Bottled water is a frivolous and wasteful use of dwindling groundwater reserves. It is entirely consumptive – meaning almost all the water extracted leaves the watershed and does not replenish the aquifer. Council of Canadians chapters across the country have found water bottled in Nestlé's Aberfoyle and Hope plants for sale as far away as Newfoundland and Yellowknife.

The Council of Canadians is working with local groups to pressure provincial governments to phase out bottled water takings. The Council will also continue investigating where Nestlé and other bottled water products are being exported to. We are also promoting the Blue Communities Project, a growing global movement that encourages municipalities and other communities to ban bottled water, protect the human right to water, and promote public water and wastewater services.

Emma Lui is the Water Campaigner with the Council of Canadians. With files from Mark Calzavara, Ontario-Quebec-Nunavut Regional Organizer.

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THE COUNCIL OF CANADIANS
300-251 Bank Street
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1X3
Email: inquiries@canadians.org
Tel: 1-800-387-7177

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