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A Springfield company's water grab

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Today, residents of our small city of Weed, California will gather in protest outside the headquarters of Roseburg Forest Products — right across the freeway from The Register-Guard. We traveled here to deliver a simple request to Roseburg's management: Stop your attempts to take away the water source that our community has depended upon for 100 years. And while you're at it, drop the lawsuit that you're using as an attempt to intimidate us into silence.

Soon after a devastating fire in 2014 destroyed more than 150 homes in our community, Roseburg began aggressively asserting its purported right to our community's main source of drinking water, a spring coming from Mt. Shasta. The spring is located within Roseburg's property, but the city has had rights to the water for generations. It is offensive enough that the company wants to deprive us of this water in order to sell it to an international bottling company. But what is even more offensive is the unethical way the company has handled the situation.

A group of nine concerned citizens, including myself, joined together to raise our concerns. Many of us had never spoken out on a public issue like this before. We asked state agencies to look into the issue and restore the City of Weed's water right. Then we asked the Weed City Council to endorse our request for an investigation, which they did.

Speaking up on an issue of public interest, as concerned citizens, is a right protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. But that didn't stop Roseburg from suing us and the Weed City Council.

It is difficult, until you are in the middle of something like this, to understand how intimidating and scary it is to be named in a lawsuit by a huge company with lots of money to spend on lawyers and, in this case, acting in cahoots with an even bigger, well-resourced multinational corporation. There was a fear we could be liable for huge legal penalties. One co-defendant mentioned to me that his wife was worried they might lose their house.

This is exactly what "SLAPP" lawsuits — Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation — are intended to do. Companies use this bullying tactic to intimidate people against speaking out. Our presence today at Roseburg's corporate headquarters demonstrates that, in our case, this tactic has failed.

In December 2017, the court dismissed Roseburg's lawsuit against us under California's anti-SLAPP law. The judge ruled that our actions were indeed free speech protected under the U.S. Constitution. But Roseburg has appealed the decision and is using delaying tactics to keep the lawsuit against the "Weed 9" in court for as long as possible.

Meanwhile, the company continues to drag out the lawsuit against the City of Weed in its continued effort to deprive us of our water. This despite the fact that we have uncovered strong documentation that International Paper, Roseburg's predecessor, intended to formally transfer the water right to the City of Weed before it closed the mill in 1982. Years later, when our spring water became a sought-after commodity coveted by the international water bottling industry, Roseburg decided, despite its long relationship with Weed, to sell out our town by laying claim to the water on which we have long depended.

Roseburg has acted unethically, and its relationship with the citizens of Weed has suffered. Its pursuit of our drinking water and its bullying tactics are draining resources from our economically-challenged and fire-affected community — resources that would be better spent on rebuilding and providing basic services to residents and businesses.

We will rally today in front of Roseburg's headquarters at 11 a.m. to demand justice. We invite you to join us. For more information, please visit our website at <https://waterforweedca.org/events>.

Bruce Shoemaker is a researcher focused on natural resource issues in Southeast Asia and one of nine residents of Weed, California who have been sued by Roseburg Forest Products for exercising their First Amendment rights in speaking out against Roseburg's attempt to take over their community's main water source.