

Register-Guard

OPINION

The 'Weed 9' demonstrate the power of civic action

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On Tuesday we watched protesters descend on Roseburg Forest Products' Springfield headquarters, which is across the highway from The Register-Guard's offices. Whatever one thinks of the protesters' specific grievances against the company, it's hard not to cheer for underdogs who care so much about their community and are taking on deep corporate pockets with little more than moxie.

The dispute is over water in the arid Northern California city of Weed. Contracts and agreements going back decades have created uncertainty over who gets to draw from the Beaughan Springs and who doesn't. Roseburg Forest Products owns the property with the springs, but the community believes it has a right to some of the water. It's all tied up in court and should interest anyone with a penchant for civil action.

We're more interested in the civic action, though.

Roseburg Forest Products might not be a Fortune 500 company, but in Weed — Population: 2,716 — it's a corporate behemoth. That alone might have convinced a lot of people to let the company have its way about the water.

Some Weed residents are made of sterner stuff, though. They showed up at public meetings, made a reasoned case, and brought attention to the issue. They weren't rabble rousers; they were regular people who saw a problem and hoped that their local and state governments could help.

As broken as our politics have become in many ways, there is still a chance to speak up and to shape the public conversation. The Weed City Council listened and joined the fray.

Roseburg Forest Products wasn't having it, though. The company hauled the city and nine residents, who came to be called the Weed 9, into court. It wanted a judge to decide whose water it is.

That part of the lawsuit was fine. The legal system exists to resolve such disputes.

But the company also sought to silence the Weed 9 and other residents who would challenge the company publicly.

Most regular people, faced with a lawsuit from a big company with well-paid lawyers might capitulate, but again the Weed 9 stood firm.

Lawsuits like this that are intended to intimidate people from speaking out in public forums are called SLAPP suits — Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation. They're illegal in California — and in Oregon, for what it's worth — and the judge promptly ruled that residents could continue to make the water rights a public issue.

Roseburg Forest Products appealed, forcing the defendants to continue fighting in court, which is rarely inexpensive.

Meanwhile, the residents have fought a scrappy, savvy media campaign that maximizes exposure. And on Tuesday, they came to Springfield to protest in front of the corporate headquarters. Some Oregonians joined them, and their combined civic action keeps Roseburg Forest Products on the hot seat.

Even if the company wins in court, it is losing in the court of public perception. It's never a good look to be the bully, and that's what it has become with its SLAPP suit.