

Timber Company Tells California Town, Go Find Your Own Water

By Thomas Fuller

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WEED, Calif. — The water that gurgles from a spring on the edge of this Northern California logging town is so pristine that for more than a century it has been piped directly to the wooden homes spread across hills and gullies.

To the residents of Weed, which sits in the foothills of Mount Shasta, a snow-capped dormant volcano, the spring water is a blessing during a time of severe and prolonged drought.

To the lumber company that owns the land where the spring is, the water is a business opportunity.

Roseburg Forest Products, an Oregon-based company that owns the pine forest where the spring surfaces, is demanding that the city of Weed get its water elsewhere.

“The city needs to actively look for another source of water,” said Ellen Porter, the director of environmental affairs for Roseburg who led the company’s negotiations with the city. “Roseburg is not in a position to guarantee the availability of that water for a long period of time.”

For the past 50 years, the company charged the city \$1 a year for use of water from the Beaughan Spring. As of July, it began charging \$97,500 annually. A contract signed this year directs the city to look for alternative sources.

Roseburg has not made public what it plans to do with the water it wants to take back from the city. But it already sells water to Crystal Geyser Alpine Spring, which bottles it in Weed and ships it as far away as Japan. Crystal Geyser is looking to increase its overall supply.

Residents of Weed, including the current mayor and three former mayors, say the water was always intended for municipal and domestic use and should not be sold to the highest bidder.



Bob Hall, a member of the Weed City Council, at Beaughan Spring, a source of Weed's water. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

“The corporate mentality is that they can make more money selling this water to Japan,” said Bob Hall, a former mayor of

Weed and currently a member of the City Council. “We were hooked at the hip with this company for years,” he said of the timber company, the largest private employer in the area. “Now, they are taking advantage of people who can’t defend themselves.”

Bottled-water plants have met with resistance and in some cases protests in a number of places across California, including a Nestlé plant last year in Sacramento. In the water-rich towns in the shadow of Mount Shasta, residents have raised concerns over proposed bottling plants that they say could severely diminish local water supplies.

A measure on the ballot in the November election in Siskiyou County, where the towns are, would for the first time require that companies obtain permits to export water.

The disputes echo California’s broader water wars. Five years of drought have escalated competition among farmers, factories and residents over water use and have pitted the arid south against the more water-rich north.

“Water is money,” said David Webb, a resident of the city of Mount Shasta who follows the water disputes in the area. “If you can get it, you can make money from it.”

The mayor of Weed, Ken Palfini, says the value of the city’s water was emphasized during a visit several weeks ago by Pierre Papillaud, the founder of the company that owns Crystal Geyser Alpine Spring. In what the mayor and another participant described as a tirade of abuse, Mr. Papillaud demanded that the city give up its spring water so that his company could have more.

“He said if he didn’t get his way, he was going to blow up the bottling plant,” Mr. Palfini said of Mr. Papillaud’s visit. “He said that twice.”

Mr. Papillaud’s son Ronan Papillaud came to Weed in mid-September to apologize for the brusque treatment and to rescind his father’s demands. But Mr. Palfini said it was a lesson on how small municipalities in the area need to protect themselves from water-hungry companies.



Paul Welliver at the controls of a lathe at the Roseburg Forest Products mill in Weed. Roseburg owns the pine forest where the spring providing city water surfaces. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

“They are just corporations,” Mr. Palfini said. “They are not your friend.”

Residents of Weed, which is still rebuilding after a major wildfire two years ago, say they believe that their dispute with Roseburg will end in the courts and that they have a document showing that the previous owner of Roseburg’s timber business here, International Paper, handed over water rights to the city in 1982.

But they describe a David and Goliath battle between Roseburg, a wealthy corporation capable of paying for high-powered lawyers, and a relatively poor city with just 2,700 people.

Residents in Weed followed the legal battles of Missoula, Mont., where the State Supreme Court ruled in August that the city could seize water from a private company by eminent domain to secure the municipal water supply.

The alternative to legal proceedings for now is to drill a new well at a cost of around \$2 million, according to Ron Stock, the Weed city administrator.

Roseburg has suggested a site on its property, but city officials say it is potentially dangerous: The well would be located a few hundred yards from a former wood treatment facility that is contaminated with highly toxic chemicals including arsenic. The facility, which is managed by Roseburg, was fenced off in 1986 and has been declared a Superfund site.

Because of the complex hydrology of the area, including lava tubes that carry water in various directions under the mountains, the city would not know whether the water was safe until it drilled a test well, Mr. Stock said.

“The city has to be very careful,” he said. “We don’t want a Flint, Mich., situation.”

Ms. Porter, the Roseburg representative, said the proposed well site was “well outside any area of contamination.”

In an interview at the company’s timber plant outside Weed, where logs are spun and shaved into thin sheets used for plywood, Ms. Porter blamed Mr. Hall, the city councilor, and others in the city for casting Roseburg in a bad light.



Bottles filled with water from the Mount Shasta city spring in a park in Mount Shasta, Calif. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

“We are becoming the corporate bad guy, and that’s really unfortunate,” she said. The city already has wells that serve around half the population, she said.

Ronan Papillaud, the president of CG Roxane, which owns Crystal Geyser Alpine Spring together with a Japanese pharmaceutical company, Otsuka, was also defensive when asked about his company’s plans.

“We do not belong in this story,” Mr. Papillaud said. “We are not depriving anyone of anything.” CG Roxane has bought water from Roseburg since the late 1990s and dedicates one of its production lines in its Weed plant to bottling water bound for Japan.

Mr. Papillaud described his deal with Roseburg as a simple relationship between a buyer and seller.

“Is this blood water? Are they involved in child labor?” he asked rhetorically. “We are clients, end of story.”

Watching the water dispute warily are members of the Winnemem Wintu, a small Native American tribe that considers

the slopes of Mount Shasta sacred.

According to tribal beliefs, one of the springs on the mountain is the place where animals and mankind emerged into the world. Six years ago, for the first time in the oral history of the tribe, that spring dried up, according to Luisa Navejas, a tribe member.

The water around Mount Shasta is not limitless, she said.

“This mountain is calling us now, and we need to listen,” Ms. Navejas said of the inactive volcano.

“This mountain will talk,” she said. “The time will come.”