

WATER

Nestle bottles millions of litres of Canadian water — and pays nothing

Billion-dollar company extracting B.C.'s drinking water for free, then selling it back to Canadians



PHOTO: WILSON HUI / FLICKR

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Dan Fumano, The Province

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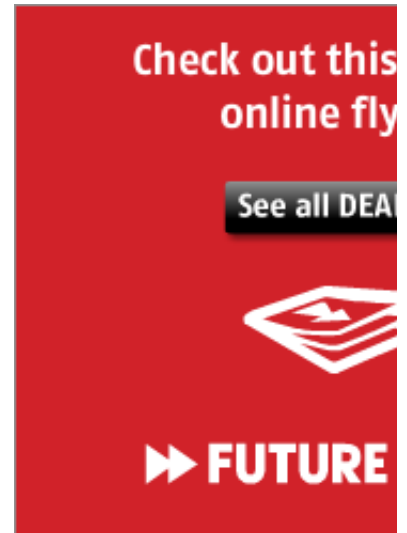
The price of a litre of bottled water in B.C. is often higher than a litre of gasoline.

However, the price paid by the world's largest bottled water company for taking 265 million litres of fresh water every year from a well in the Fraser Valley — not a cent.

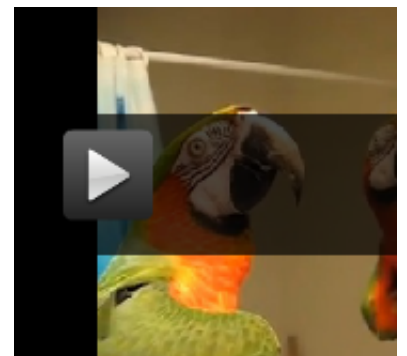
Because of B.C.'s lack of groundwater regulation, Nestlé

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Waters Canada — a division of the multi-billion-dollar Switzerland-based Nestlé Group, the world’s largest food company — is not required to measure, report, or pay a penny for the millions of litres of water it draws from Hope and then sells across Western Canada.

According to the provincial Ministry of Environment, “B.C. is the only jurisdiction in Canada that doesn’t regulate groundwater use.”

“The province does not license groundwater, charge a rental for groundwater withdrawals or track how much bottled water companies are taking from wells,” said a Ministry of Environment spokesperson in an email to The Province.

This isn’t new. Critics have been calling for change for years now, saying the lack of groundwater regulation is just one outdated example from the century-old Water Act.

The Ministry of Environment has said they plan — in the 2014 legislature sitting — to introduce groundwater regulation with the proposed Water Sustainability Act, which would update and replace the existing Water Act, established in 1909. But experts note that successive governments have been talking about modernizing water for decades, but the issue keeps falling off the agenda.

This time, many hope it will be different.

It’s really the Wild West out here in terms of groundwater

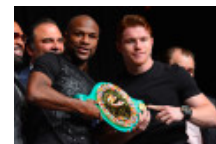
“It’s really the Wild West out here in terms of groundwater. And it’s been going on for over 20 years, that the Ministry of Environment, the provincial government has been saying that they’re going to make these changes, and it just hasn’t gone through yet,” said Linda Nowlan, conservation

director from World Wildlife Fund Canada.

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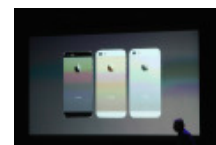
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‘They take it and sell it back to us’

In the District of Hope, Nestlé’s well draws from the same aquifer relied upon by about 6,000 nearby residents, and some of them are concerned.

“We have water that’s so clean and so pure, it’s amazing. And then they take it and sell it back to us in plastic bottles,” said Hope resident Sharlene Harrison-Hinds.

Sheila Muxlow lives in nearby Chilliwack, downstream the Fraser River from Hope. As campaign director for the WaterWealth Project, she often hears from Hope residents who worry about the government’s lack of oversight with Nestlé’s operations there.

“It’s unsettling,” Muxlow said. “What’s going to happen in the long term, if Nestlé keeps taking and taking and taking?”

While Nestlé is the largest bottled water seller in B.C., others, including Whistler Water and Mountain Spring Water, also draw groundwater from B.C.

When asked by The Province, those companies declined to release the volume of their withdrawals.

A large employer in Hope

Nestlé is one of the largest employers in the District of Hope, providing about 75 jobs, said District of Hope chief administrative officer John Fortoloczky. Though Nestlé is not required to measure and report their water withdrawals to the government, the company voluntarily reports to the District of Hope, said a Nestlé Waters Canada executive, reached in Guelph, Ont. last week.

“What we do in Hope exceeds what is proposed by the province of British Columbia,” said John Challinor, Nestlé Waters Canada’s director of corporate affairs. Nestle keeps records of water quality and the company’s mapping of the underground water resources in the area exceeds what government scientists have done, Challinor said.



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“We do these annual reports ... We’re doing it voluntarily with (the local government). If we are asked to provide it as a condition of a new permit, that’s easy to do, because we’re already doing it,” Challinor said.

But the fact that Nestlé’s reports are internal and voluntary is the very issue of concern, said Ben Parfitt, a resource policy analyst with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

“There’s a big, big difference between voluntary reporting and mandatory,” said Parfitt. “If it’s voluntary, there’s nothing to stop a company or major water user from choosing not to report ... That is absolutely critical. You can’t run a system like this on a voluntary basis.”

Since groundwater remains unregulated in B.C., Nestle does not require a permit for the water they withdraw.

“No permit, no reporting, no tracking, no nothing,” said David Slade, co-owner of Drillwell Enterprises, a Vancouver Island well-drilling company. “So you could drill a well on your property, and drill it right next to your neighbour’s well, and you could pump that well at 100 gallons a minute, 24 hours a day, seven days a week and waste all the water, pour it on the ground if you wanted to ... As far as depleting the resource, or abusing the resource, there is no regulation. So it is the Wild, Wild West.”

Water should be a ‘public trust’

The Council of Canadians, a national citizen advocacy group, takes the position that water should be treated as a public trust, a valuable resource protected for the benefit of all Canadians.

But when the government allows a multi-billion dollar, international corporation to withdraw water for free to sell back to us, this doesn’t seem to serve the public good, said Emma Lui, national water campaigner for the Council of Canadians, reached in Ottawa. Compared with the rest of the country, Lui said, “When you look at all these different

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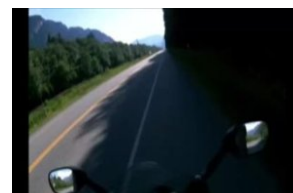


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factors, B.C. actually is doing quite poorly: that they don't include groundwater (in their water licensing system), they don't have any sort of public registry of who's taking groundwater, they don't charge."

**No
permit, no
reporting,
no
tracking,
no
nothing**

Nestlé is far from the only large company withdrawing B.C.'s groundwater for free, and Challinor said Nestlé is "largely supportive of what the government is trying to do" with modernizing the Water Act. He said he plans to sit down with B.C.'s new environment minister Mary Polak in the fall, to discuss these issues. Nestle supports the government moving toward

increased regulation, monitoring and reporting.

As far as the government charging for groundwater, Challinor said "We have no problem with paying for water, as long as the price is based on the actual cost of regulating the program."

If you walk into Cooper's Foods in downtown Hope — less than 5 km away from Nestlé's bottling plant — and buy a 1.5 litre bottle of Nestlé Pure Life water, it will set you back \$1.19.

That's \$1.19 more than Nestle paid to the government last year for withdrawing more than 265 million litres of fresh water from the well.

Nestlé's other water bottling plant in Canada is in Wellington County, Ont., where the province requires them to buy a license and pay for the water they extract. Some critics, including Lui and Parfitt, feel that Ontario's charge of \$3.71 per million litres is still too paltry. But still, they say, it's more fair than B.C. charging nothing.

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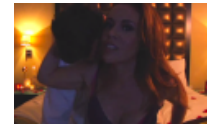
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