

As state ends bottled water program in Flint, officials grant new permits to Nestlé Waters

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In a turn of events so ironic it could have been scripted by Franz Kafka, on April 2, the state of Michigan awarded Nestlé Waters, the world's largest bottled water corporation, the right to draw 167 percent more water from the states' aquifers than it did last year. Four days later, Governor Rick Snyder announced the state would no longer distribute free bottled water to the residents of Flint, Michigan, whose water was contaminated by lead due to actions of state and local officials.

Nestlé's new agreement with the state of Michigan will allow the multinational conglomerate to pump 570,000 gallons per day—two-and-a-half times what it would take to provide for every person in Flint. The water increase was awarded by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). Nestlé Waters has been the leading bottled water brand in the world since 2008. Its 51 labels include Ice Mountain, Nestlé Pure Life, Arrowhead, Poland Spring, Deer Park, Ozarka, Zephyrhills, Acqua Panna, San Pellegrino, Perrier, Vittel, and Buxton.

For 12 years, Nestlé—under Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and Republican Governor Snyder—has been pumping spring water for its “Ice Mountain” label near Evart, Michigan, about 140 miles northwest of Flint. Evart is one of three Nestlé water-pumping locations in the state. Because Nestlé owns the wells it is pumping, the company only pays \$200 in administrative fees to authorize its groundwater extraction, plus a one-time \$5,000 fee for permit application review. While Nestlé pays \$200 for 210 million gallons a year, an average Flint family pays between \$120 and \$200 each month for water, which is not safe to drink from the tap.

Public comments on Nestlé's request for a new permit were originally scheduled to last 45 days but had

to be extended to seven months because opposition was so great. Of the more than 80,945 comments, only 75 were in favor of granting the permit. Most cited their opposition to corporate greed, and many others said water was a right, not a commodity. There were also 340,000 signatures on petitions expressing concerns about water withdrawal and its impact.

In a press release announcing the approval of the Nestlé groundwater permit, MDEQ Director Heidi Grether said, “In full transparency, the majority of the public comments received were in opposition of the permit, but most of them related to issues of public policy which are not, and should not be, part of an administrative permit decision. We cannot base our decisions on public opinion because our department is required to follow the rule of law when making determinations.” In other words, when it comes to corporate profit, the concerns and sentiments of the public mean nothing to Michigan officials.

The decision, four days later, to end the free distribution of bottled water in Flint also provoked popular anger. Some 100 residents traveled to Lansing to protest the decision. Lori Lacko, a longtime resident, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “This is the same thing over and over again. The politicians don't want to take responsibility for what they have done.

“I'm paying \$130 a month to flush my toilet. But I can't drink the water. I believe what they are doing is purposefully causing hysteria in the population. I have a lot of neighbors who haven't had their water tested. They're not drinking it.”

In an effort to justify this provocation, Snyder claimed the latest tests by the MDEQ show lead in water at the rate of 4 parts per billion (ppb), which is less than the 15 ppb considered an “action level” by the US Environmental Protection Agency's Lead and

Copper Rule. Scientists have stated, however, that no amount of lead in water is safe.

Only one third of the lead and galvanized service lines in Flint have been replaced, and the balance of 12,000 are not slated for completion until 2020. Bottled water was seen as a modest, but necessary safety measure by Flint residents. Due to the cover-up by every level of government, workers and their families are legitimately distrustful of the water and are hostile to the entire political establishment.

Speaking out against the ending of bottled water, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, the pediatrician who helped expose the lead poisoning crisis in Flint, tweeted, “This is wrong. Until all lead pipes are replaced, state should make available bottled water and filters to Flint residents.”

Summing up the parasitic outlook of those looking to profit from the commodification of water, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, the current chairman and former CEO of Nestlé, said in a videotaped interview in 2013 , “Water is of course, the most important raw material we have today in the world. It’s a question of whether we should privatize the normal water supply for the population. And there are two different opinions on the matter: The one opinion which I think is extreme, is represented by the NGOs, who bang on about declaring water a public right. That means that as a human being you should have a right to water. That’s an extreme solution. And the other view says water is a foodstuff like any other. And like any other foodstuff, it should have a market value.

“I’m still of the opinion that the biggest social responsibility of any CEO is to maintain and ensure the successful and profitable future of his enterprise. ...”



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