

Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

Residents oppose Poland Spring deal

Water district trustees will vote Wednesday on a plan to draw 250,000 gallons of water day in Wells.

By *ELBERT AULL, Staff Writer*

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Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

Residents question Superintendent Norm Labbe, standing at center, during Sunday's meeting on a proposed contract between Poland Spring and the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Wells Water District.

KENNEBUNK — Bottle it up and send it elsewhere.

That's what a crowd of more than 100 people told a local water district official to do with a contract to sell water to Poland Spring for the next 30 years.

The suggestion came – sometimes loudly – during a public meeting Sunday night on a proposed deal that would grant the company access to Branch Brook in Wells for less than a penny per gallon.

"It isn't a clean business," said Jamilla El-Shafei of Kennebunk, who organized the meeting.

El-Shafei is best known as the peace activist who organized large anti-war demonstrations near the Bush family compound in Kennebunkport last year.

She has begun a last-minute organizing drive intended to amplify public opposition to the Poland Spring proposal just days before it is scheduled for a vote.

The deal, which will go before trustees for the district which includes Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Wells, for a vote on Wednesday, would give Poland Spring permission to draw as much as 250,000 gallons a day from district-owned land in Wells.

The company would pump the water through a mile-long pipe to a fill station to be built along Route 109 in Sanford. The water would be trucked to the company's bottling plant in Hollis.

Company officials and the water district's superintendent said the proposal could create jobs and provide a stream of income to help keep water bills down. Critics said Poland Spring is offering too little for the Branch Brook water at a time when climate change casts a cloud of uncertainty over the long-term availability of many natural resources.

Some argued that the water district should be wary of selling to a large corporation – Poland Spring is a subsidiary of Nestle Waters North America – with a history of legal battles over water withdrawals. Others said the process of bottling, trucking and selling water is a waste of resources that adds to landfills and global warming.

If the deal is approved on Wednesday and the company begins its operation next year as planned, it will pay about six-tenths of a cent for each gallon of water it draws from Branch Brook, a rate that would fluctuate over time.

Water district Superintendent Norm Labbe said Poland Spring would be obligated to pay double the rate the district charges other commercial customers.

Many who attended the meeting bristled at the price. "I'd love to have a product I could get for half-a-penny and sell for a dollar-nine," said William Zaneski, 62, of Kennebunk, listing the cost of a gallon of Poland Spring water from a local store. Zaneski said the water district should hold out for a higher price.

Poland Spring Natural Resources Manager Tom Brennan, who didn't attend the event, said in a telephone

interview that the per-gallon rate is in line with other communities' charges.

Brennan said activists have unfairly targeted Poland Spring.

"If we were making soda pop or beer, I don't think you would get the same focus. However, those industries use water," he said.

Brennan says the Branch Brook proposal could add 30 Mainers to the 800 already employed by Poland Spring if it yields enough water to open another bottling line at the company's plant in Hollis.

"This is a manufacturing industry, ours, that can actually function in rural areas and put people to work," he said.

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