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Siskiyou voters can end county's sweetheart deal for water bottlers



Measure H would amend Siskiyou County's groundwater ordinance to require a permit for bottling companies to extract groundwater for use outside of Siskiyou County.

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Siskiyou County is water-rich. Springs bubble out of rocks from a fabric of underground lava tubes lacing the land at the base of Mount Shasta. Combined with snowmelt, the area contributes as much as 40 percent of the state's water supply.

County officials have been managing their most precious resource in blissful ignorance. Despite a dearth of information about the aquifer, they have courted corporations that bottle and export

Siskiyou water without knowing how much water they actually have or how much they are giving away.

Over the last decade, as many as 10 bottling operations have been proposed. All have been welcomed by a county desperate for jobs lost to a disappearing timber industry.

Angelina Cook has been part of a community response to each new bottling proposal, challenging the official open-arms welcome and pleading instead for scientific studies to measure what the aquifer holds and what can be extracted sustainably.

Finally having enough of this piecemeal approach, Cook devised a November ballot initiative that would end the sweetheart exemptions bottling companies now enjoy. [Measure H](#) would amend the county's groundwater ordinance to require a permit for bottling companies to extract groundwater for use outside of Siskiyou County. Permit applications would trigger the appropriate environmental review, said Cook, a resident of McCloud.

If approved, the change would end the contentious process she and others went through last year over a proposal to reopen a shuttered Coca-Cola bottling plant in Mount Shasta. Faced with county supervisors' refusal to require an environmental impact report, they sued claiming violations of the California Environmental Quality Act. The county conceded: A draft environmental study of the effects of Crystal Geysers' proposed operation is expected later this year.

That should comfort the plant's neighbors, who watched their well levels drop when Coca-Cola was operating, and then rebound when it closed in 2010. But it will do nothing for residents of McCloud, where a partnership is developing plans to build a bottling plant. And it will do nothing for communities adjacent to the next water bottling proposal that comes along.

"Measure H is a humble attempt to change the paradigm – to manage our groundwater before we deplete our aquifer," Cook said.

County officials, too, are worried about losing their springs and groundwater, said Grace Bennett, Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors chairwoman. But Measure H would just add regulations the county would have to enforce, she said: "We don't need any more complications."

Besides, Bennett noted, the county has a water ordinance that has worked well. That's the ordinance Measure H would amend – the one that exempts bottling companies from getting a permit to export water out of Siskiyou County.

Instead of endorsing Measure H, Bennett and other officials are watching to see how the state's 2014 groundwater management legislation will affect Siskiyou County.

“Wait-and-see” won’t work – not when a changing climate is shrinking snowfields and drying up reliable water sources across the state. Not with the headwaters of the Sacramento River.

Potential depletion of Siskiyou’s groundwater resources should trigger memories of when the local economy went bust after the loss of its booming timber industry. Siskiyou County has already witnessed the effects of extracting more than a natural resource can sustainably bear.

Today it needs scientific information to calculate how much water it can afford to export. Officials should start gathering baseline information on the aquifer and monitoring existing wells.

They don’t need Measure H to do that; supervisors could launch that process without a ballot measure. And they should, whether mandated by voters or voluntarily: Before the state intervenes with its own regulations. Before it’s too late for an irreplaceable resource.

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