



Mt. Shasta, with its springs that have proven so valuable to purveyors of bottled water, as seen from the far less water-rich Northern California community of Weed. Michael Yates

[CALIFORNIA FORUM](#)

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Birthright or asset? A community and a corporation go to court over Shasta's springs.

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Residents of Weed, a picturesque city in the shadow of Mt. Shasta, have relied on pure gravity-fed spring water for over a century. Today, they are battling Roseburg Forest Products for the right to continue.

Roseburg, the Oregon-based company that owns the land beneath Beaughan Springs, sees more lucrative opportunities than providing water to Weed. Its confidential contract with international bottler Crystal Geysers suggests that Weed's water is headed to Japan and elsewhere.

For Weed residents the water is a birthright, not something that can be sold to a foreign party. They want what they have always had.

The conflict is part of a larger battle waged by communities throughout the Mt. Shasta region over the spring water that bubbles out of the rocks from underground lava tubes lacing the base of Mt. Shasta. Combined with snowmelt, the area contributes as much as 40 percent to the state's water supply. Over the last decade, 10 operations have been proposed in Siskiyou County to bottle and export this water.

Beyond the region lies a larger national conflict: Do we find meaning through local community or career and commercial gain? Weed's water conflict reflects a deeper national divide that is less right vs. left than hometown vs. urban.

The locals believe their right to the Beaughan Springs water dates to the 1960s. Now just fewer than 3,000 people, the community began as a classic company town in 1897, when Abner Weed launched the first of a succession of lumber mills. In 1961, International Paper Co., Roseburg's predecessor, sold the land and 600 houses to the newly incorporated city.

Water rights should have come with the land, but instead city officials signed a 50-year lease for 2 cubic feet per second of water at \$1 a year. They were new at government, said former mayor Bob Hall: "They figured 50 years was never going to happen."

It almost didn't. When International Paper closed in 1982, town fathers thought they had secured the city's future with a document from the company guaranteeing water rights. The document mysteriously disappeared – for decades.

In 1996 Crystal Geysers came to town seeking spring water to bottle and sell as far away as Japan. City officials welcomed the jobs and were prepared to sell some water. That's when Roseburg stepped in, claiming it acquired the water rights when it bought the land from International Paper in 1983.

Last year, Roseburg announced that it [would not renew the 50-year lease](#). Adding to that shock was a visit from a Crystal Geysers corporate founder who demanded more water to fill plastic bottles for export. In a now-legendary tirade in which he said he would blow up the facility if he didn't get what

he wanted, the French billionaire threatened, among other things, to “close the plant and ‘vomit,’ ” Hall said.

Under the duress of losing city water, Weed officials signed a lease with Roseburg for less water at \$97,500 annually.

A group of citizens sued Roseburg and the city over the lease. Roseburg struck back in May, naming Hall and eight other community leaders in a complaint asking the court to decide who has the right to Beaugan Springs water. The first hearing could be in August.

The battle over Weed water rights and the larger regional battle over bottling are manifestations of the troubling national split laid bare in November. It’s what Guardian writer Chris Arnade calls the [divide between front row and back row people](#): those who excelled in school and left home and those at the back of the classroom who didn’t; those who find meaning through education and their careers; and those who find it through their communities. For small towns, the fear is losing control to people who live at a different pace in a world with different values.

Roseburg is an urban-based corporation with operations in six states. For all its commitment to Weed’s schools and civic organizations, the company is looking beyond Siskiyou County to global commerce: “You can’t go back,” said Ellen Porter, company director of environmental affairs.

Jim Gubetta, 90, a former mayor, has lived in Weed since he was 3. He has no plans to leave the place with a motto as corny as it is endearing: “Weed like to welcome you.” Gubetta sums up the conflict “pure and simple: It’s the big guy taking from the little guy.”

A judge may be able to sort out who has the rights to Weed’s water. The larger issue of who controls what over whom is up to the rest of us, both those who left small towns and those who stayed.

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