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Water for Sale

Important issues finally start to get their due

November 24, 2001

There are conflicting proposals, and more to come, but at least Michigan has awakened to the fact that the state must be more involved in overseeing water use.

Last week, both the Department of Environmental Quality and state Democrats issued plans. A Senate task force studying Great Lakes problems is expected to weigh in soon, as well.

Pressure has built since Perrier Corp. arrived in Michigan, south of Big Rapids, to pump groundwater for its Ice Mountain brand. The operation, which got a DEQ permit this summer, will not be the first water bottler here, but it is the biggest.

Of even more concern is how much of its product will leave the watershed. Dealing in water as a national and even international commodity is all new to a state bordered by four of the five Great Lakes, accustomed to taking its bounty for granted and assuming that water's "price" was only the cost of moving it from the source to the faucet.

But after one effort to ship Lake Superior water to Asia, and now with Perrier's arrival, worries about the Great Lakes' bounty have mounted. Lake levels are also particularly low now, and global warming scenarios raise the prospect of even more stress on the lakes. The role of groundwater, which eventually feeds the surface waters throughout the region, remains understudied and poorly understood.

As a first step, even while rules are being proposed and discussed, the state needs to get some groundwater research going. Groundwater undergoes natural filtering as it

perks through the soil and rock, and its contribution to water quality may be as important or more important than the actual quantity used.

Michigan also needs to think seriously about water pricing. Over the years, enormous amounts of money, both public and private, have gone into keeping the water clean, and the job is hardly done. At the least, anyone who wants to take water away ought to reimburse the people who work hard to keep that water clean. Perhaps companies that extract and sell water should also pay market-based royalties, as oil drillers do.

Michiganders' love of their water needs to be at the core of the complex discussions that are required. At last, those discussions have begun.

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