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NEWS with The Grand Rapids Press

New laws for Great Lakes: Perrier proposal shows holes in state's water management

Monday, December 3, 2001

While a problem in many respects, Perrier's proposed water bottling plant near Big Rapids has spilled over into a healthy debate. The project has pointed up the inadequacy of Michigan's water management laws.

Sometime early next year the Legislature will begin serious debate on the matter. Foremost in the minds of lawmakers should be requiring an assessment of the effect that proposed high-capacity wells would have on the surrounding environment and other water sources.

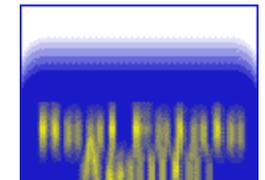
That evaluation was conducted in Perrier's case but was not required by law. What's more, companies shouldn't ship away Great Lakes water without giving something back -- in particular, guarantees that the watershed they're tapping will be maintained and replenished.

Michigan is the only state entirely within the Great Lakes Basin. Yet we lag behind the seven other basin states -- Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin -- in laws on water withdrawals. This became obvious when the Perrier Group sought to bottle spring water in rural Mecosta County. The plant, now under construction, will draw as much as 720,000 gallons of groundwater a day from a private hunting preserve then pipe it 12 miles to a bottling factory near U.S. 131 for sale under the company's Ice Mountain Spring Water label. That's as much as 262 million gallons a year taken from the Great Lakes

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Basin for sale in and outside the state.

The state's Safe Drinking Water Act required the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to evaluate the water Perrier will bottle for its quality. But no law adequately addressed the quantity Perrier plans to remove. That legal loophole could leave neighboring residential or municipal wells pumping dirt as commercial bottlers get rich on the state's liquid gold.

Neither does any law guarantee environmental protection. High-capacity wells in other parts of the country -- some operated by Perrier -- have threatened surrounding lakes, streams and wetlands, where fish and other wildlife depend on certain water levels for food and reproduction. Sen. Kenneth Sikkema, R-Grandville, has just completed a series of public hearings on the state's water. Mr. Sikkema's Great Lakes Conservation Task Force has identified protecting aquifers as one of five priorities to be addressed. He plans to recommend specific legislation sometime early next year.

Last month, Democratic officials, including Rep. Julie Dennis, D-Muskegon, and Attorney General Jennifer Granholm, unveiled the broad outlines for new water management laws. On the same day, DEQ Director Russell Harding put forward his own proposal. The plans differ, but both recognize that the current laws are inadequate to address Perrier-like projects in full scope.

The idea of a company hauling the state's groundwater out of Michigan for sale elsewhere has shaken residents and lawmakers from complacency. To states where water is in short supply, the Great Lakes look like the mother lode. Census figures, showing population shifting to thirsty regions in the South and West, illustrate the urgent need for turning off the spigot on large-scale withdrawals before they become reality.

The threat isn't just outside Michigan. Mr. Sikkema's task force turned up cases inside the state where high-capacity pumping in some areas has caused shortages nearby. Earlier this year Great Lakes governors and the premiers of Ontario and Quebec made a positive step toward protecting Great Lakes water through an agreement known as Annex 2001 to the Great Lakes Charter.

That agreement, to be written into U.S. and

Canadian law, will help fend off dangerous federal control of the Great Lakes. Control of Great Lakes water should rest with Great Lakes governors and premiers, not politicians in Washington. In addition, Michigan needs laws to guard groundwater, which by the Annex's definition is part of the Great Lakes Basin.

If some environmental good has come from Perrier's proposal, it is in exposing this gaping hole in water protection. Repairing it should be a top priority. Lawmakers and the governor can't wait for another water bottling plant to move in before they act.

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