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US: Nestle faces fight for aquifer for bottled water

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Times Union. By Brian Nearing -

Environmentalists fear plans for property in Orwell, Oswego County, could threaten Salmon River

ORWELL -- A water war may be brewing between a giant Swiss multinational corporation and environmentalists on the Tug Hill Plateau. Nestle, the world's largest seller of bottled water with 72 brands in 37 countries, has set its sights on the region's deep springs under plans to extract water from the state to satisfy a growing consumer thirst.

Last month, the company's North American division announced plans to buy a 450-acre farm in Orwell, Oswego County, for a 1.5 million-gallons-a-day, \$100 million bottling plant. The property is several miles north of the Salmon River, one of the state's premier fisheries, and in the heart of the state's lake-effect snow belt.

Nestle, which also is scouting for springs near the Catskills and in central New York, has drawn attention from Trout Unlimited and other environmental groups, which are concerned that pumping so much water could damage the Salmon River and cold-water fish like brook trout and salmon.

And that's in addition to mounting criticism that bottled water wastes fossil fuels and worsens global warming.

Nestle's foray into the Northeast stems from a desire to cut costs by producing closer to many of its customers, said Kirt Mayland, director of the Eastern Water Project

for Trout Unlimited.

Mayland outlined the group's concerns Tuesday in a letter to Gov. Eliot Spitzer. Mayland said environmentalists want a detailed study on how Nestle's proposal could affect the aquifer. They also want the company to support efforts to extend the bottle recycling law to water and other noncarbonated beverages.

"We are tired of seeing Poland Spring (a Nestle brand) water bottles floating down our streams," he said. "This is a warning shot over their heads, that they should not expect to breeze through this," he said.

Kent Koptiuch, resource manager for Nestle's New York operations, said the company is dedicated to maintaining the environment "in as natural a condition as possible."

"If we find that any withdrawal by us would be detrimental to the watershed, we could walk away from the whole thing," he said.

Koptiuch said years of study lie ahead for the project, which also needs state and federal permits.

The dispute comes as the bottled water industry, which sold more than 8.25 billion gallons in this country last year, is under increasing pressure from critics who see it as a wasteful alternative to tap water while generating millions of extra plastic bottles.

In June, the U.S. Conference of Mayors called for a study of the environmental impact. In July, under pressure from environmental activists, Pepsico said it will add "source labels" to bottles of Aquafina, saying it is tap water subjected to extra purification.

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