

Company looks for water in Montague Plains

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MONTAGUE -- Nestle Water North America is interested in exploring the Montague Plains with an eye toward tapping into the water beneath it as a source for spring water. The company has approached the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, which owns about 1,500 acres of the plains, asking permission to walk the site and do some preliminary testing, taking samples from above-ground streams and testing the flow of those streams.

"You kind of caught us in the very preliminary stages of reaching out to the state, which are the owners of that property," said Brian Flaherty, director of public affairs for Nestle Waters North America. It's the first step in a multi-phase process that may or may not lead to the area being used as a source for spring water, he said. "You caught us in the very, very early stages."

Before they tour the property and do initial testing, Nestle officials plan to contact Montague town officials to introduce themselves and tell them about their interest in the site, Flaherty said. At any one time, Nestle has about 50 different sites across the country it is considering as potential spring water sources, he said. "As a company, we don't proceed with nine out of 10 that we initially explore."

Nestle is also evaluating a site in Clinton and other sites in New York, Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire. "The demand for our company's bottled water is growing every year, so we are always in the process of evolving and finding new sites for good, quality water," Flaherty said. Nestle Waters North America started in 1976 as Perrier. The firm now sells 15 brands, including Perrier, Nestle, Poland Springs and Deer Park.

Nestle didn't need to ask permission to walk the land, since it is public, said Wayne F. MacCallum, director of the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. "But, they've been up front about it, which is the way to go." He said several towns have been on state land, done preliminary testing of water and then asked permission to draw water off the site.

"It's a preliminary survey," he said of Nestle's investigations. "A very preliminary survey. It might meet certain quality standards; it might not." MacCallum brought the issue before the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife board at its meeting this month. The board requested more information about the stream-flow testing.

If Nestle submits a formal, detailed proposal, board member Joseph Larson of Pelham said he doesn't think there would be a problem with the initial exploration. "That's not very intrusive. I think they're trying to be very careful about it. If they want to go in and drill, that's another thing." Larson is the rare and endangered species representative on the board. "Even if we are given permission to do testing, this is many steps ahead of determining whether this is something we want to proceed with," said Flaherty, adding there are many tests that staff scientists must do before that determination is made. "If it's suitable, I expect they'll be back for permission for more detailed investigations," MacCallum said.

Whether the state would allow drilling for further testing would depend on the volume being drawn and the effect on the aquifer, MacCallum said. "We need the property for fish

and wildlife conservation, period. If they did any work it would have to be beneficial to fish and wildlife conservation. It couldn't be detrimental. "I guarantee I will not allow the withdrawal of water if we don't understand the hydrology of the area because that (aquifer) is what runs the hatchery."

But, if drawing water off the property is found to meet those standards, it could be allowed, he said. The area is protected open space, so a permanent easement would need to be granted through the Legislature, MacCallum said. The director of Fisheries and Wildlife can grant a temporary license, he said. "It could be a win-win situation," he said, pointing to the potential benefits to the town of a new company and the financial benefits to state wildlife programs. "We do a lot of science to make sure any resource where we are removing water is sustainable," said Flaherty. Wherever it draws spring water, Nestle also needs to meet the approval of state and federal authorities, he said.

Why the plains? When water companies look for potential spring water sources they typically look for fish hatcheries and cold water springs or cold spring-fed brooks, said MacCallum. The Bitzer Fish Hatchery on Turners Falls Road is right across from the Montague Plains. "The only water that can support trout has got to be high-quality, cold water," he said.

Nestle already has facilities near fish hatcheries; in Maine for Poland Springs and in Pennsylvania for Deer Park, said Flaherty. "They tend to be very compatible with our operations," said Flaherty. Also, Nestle looks at watershed quality, the quantity of water in the area, the quality of the water and the taste of the water, he said.

Water for jobs? Proposed bottled water operation in Montague could bring hundreds of jobs Thursday, July 19, 2007

MONTAGUE -- If Nestle decided to build a bottling plant to tap into the water underneath the Montague Plains, it could bring 350 to 400 jobs to the region, based on how many people work at the company's plants in Maine, Nestle officials say. But, it's way too soon to talk about bottling plants since Nestle hasn't done any initial testing, said Thomas J. Brennan, northeast resource manager for Nestle Waters North America. "I can't emphasize enough how early in the process we are. These things take years. This is a very complicated process and by no means is there certainty."

Whether the Montague Plains is a viable site for Nestle to pump off water depends on the water quality, the volume of water that can be drawn and whether there is adequate access to utilities, he said. Only about one out of 10 sites that Nestle explores meet all these requirements and are selected as suitable for drawing water, said Paul J. Scapicchio, senior vice president of government relations for ML Strategies, a firm working for Nestle. Right now, Nestle is still waiting for permission from the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, which owns about 1,500 acres of the plains, to walk the site and do some preliminary testing, taking samples from above-ground streams and testing the flow of those streams. The agency's board first reviewed the proposal at its meeting last month and is expected to continue discussing the issue at its next meeting on July 31.

What initially attracted Nestle to the Montague Plains was the geology of the site, like the sand and gravel in the area, and the fish hatcheries next to the plains, Brennan said. More detailed testing, which will include test borings, water quality tests and pumping tests, will take at least X years, he said. 'We need to study (the area) through many seasons.'

In the northeast, Nestle Waters bottles water under the names Poland Springs, based in Maine, and Deer Park, based in Allentown, Pa. 'Business is growing,' said Brennan. 'Because it takes time to develop a source, you have to start before you need it.' He and several other company officials met with the Board of Selectmen, representatives from the planning staff and representatives from the water department on Wednesday. Although Nestle is still in the early stages, it wanted to let local officials know it was interested, since Nestle officials hope to be exploring the area soon, said Brennan.

'I think they were very informative,' said Board of Selectmen's Chairwoman Patricia Allen. 'Of course, it's way too early to say what this is going to be, but we're open to the idea.' Selectman Patricia Pruitt said, 'I don't really want to make up my mind before I have the whole story. I'm just trying to wait and see what happens.' It will be especially interesting to see what happens after the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife meeting later this month, she said. 'I think it's exciting there's this kind of interest in doing something like this,' said Selectman Allen Ross.

State regulations are designed to make sure no one draws too much water off a source, but Michael Brown, superintendent of the Turners Falls Water Department said he wants to be sure Montague's water source is not exploited. 'In the future, neighboring towns might also be looking for a source of water,' he said. If Nestle were to pursue a plan for a bottling plant, Brown said he's not sure what the impact would be, he said. 'I'm not going to judge anyone yet.' Nestle will do testing to make sure there is enough water in the plains, said Brennan. 'Our raison d'etre is pure water so we cannot dry up springs.' 'If that wasn't our goal we'd just build a plant in New Jersey and bottle municipal water.'

At minimum, Nestle would want to pump 150 million gallons a year, he said. It costs about \$150 million to build a bottling plant so the company wants to be sure it will be worth the investment, Brennan said. Besides the jobs other benefits of a bottling plant, if it were to become a reality, it would be tax revenue and having a clean industry without a lot of waste, he said. If it were to build a plant, it would need 80 to 100 acres for a plant, Brennan said.

If it wanted to drill in the Montague Plains, Nestle would need the approval of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. If Nestle decides to build, it would be reviewed by the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act office, a state review of large projects designed to ensure the developer provides all relevant information about the project's impact. If the plant were up and running, it would be monitored regularly by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

Nestle gets OK to walk Montague Plains Wednesday, August 01, 2007

HADLEY -- Within the next two to three weeks, Nestle Waters plans to walk the Montague Plains with an eye toward tapping into the spring water underneath as a source for its

bottled water. Scientists from Nestle will be touring the site to observe the geology, take surface water samples and to use hand-held devices to test the stream flow. That work is expected to take about three days. "It's very preliminary," said Thomas J. Brennan, northeast resource manager for Nestle Waters North America. Nestle officials say that only about one out of 10 sites that they explore meet all the necessary requirements. In the Northeast, Nestle Waters North America bottles water under the names Poland Springs, based in Maine, and Deer Park, based in Allentown, Pa.

On Tuesday, the six members of the state's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife Board, which owns 1,500 acres of the Montague Plains, voted unanimously to let Nestle tour the Plains and the fishery nearby. Nestle must provide the board with its test results and allow an official from the Division of Fisheries of Wildlife to accompany the firm when it tours the sites. Board member Jake Creedon said Tuesday's vote should not send a message that the board is endorsing or approving any more extensive work on the plains. "It is not a foot in the door."

Since the land on the Montague Plains is public land, Nestle could have gone on without permission, but it asked as a courtesy, said Wayne F. MacCallum, director of the state's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. "Nothing they're proposing to do couldn't be done right now." Board member Joseph Larson added, "What they have asked to do any high school biology class could do." Also, the information Nestle gathers will be helpful information for the state to have, he said.

Should Nestle want to do more testing, such as drilling for more extensive sampling, the company would need permission from the state's Department of Environmental Protection. It would also need to work out an arrangement with the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. It's too soon to say how that arrangement would work or what it would look like, said chairman of the Fisheries and Wildlife Board Geroge L. Darey.

Several people were at Tuesday's meeting, hoping to raise concerns about Nestle's interest. No one was allowed to speak because board policy requires that any member of the public who wants to comment must submit a letter two weeks in advance.

"I'm upset there was no interest in listening to public comment," said Doug Stephens of Montague outside of the meeting room. Stephens is chairman of the Montague Planning Board, but he said he was making his comments as a private citizen. Stephens helped survey the land in the Plains that was preserved and doesn't think Nestle should be even allowed to explore the land. "Exploration is the first step in exploitation," Stephens said. The Montague Plains is protected under state law, known as Article 97, which means the state can't allow water to be drawn off the property, he said. Peter d'Errico, member of the Leverett Selectboard, said his town is concerned about activity on the Plains since Leverett is drawing off the same aquifer.

"Our concern is who gets to control the groundwater?" asked Eileen R. Simonson, co-executive director of the Water Supply Advisory Committee, which serves as advisory board to the Massachusetts Resources Authority. There isn't a state law that regulates trucking water out of the basin where it originates, but there should be a discussion about that issue, she said. Simonson said she was concerned that the company would be taking

away a nonrenewable resource. Brennan, disagreed, "It rains. (Water) is a rapidly renewable resource."

Whether the Montague Plains is a viable site for Nestle to pump off water depends on the water quality, the volume of water that can be drawn and whether there is adequate access to utilities, he said. The state fishery across the street from the Plains is part of what sparked Nestle's interest in the area.

At any one time, Nestle has about 50 different sites across the country it is considering as potential spring water sources, said Brian Flaherty, director of public affairs. Right now, it's also evaluating a site in Clinton and other sites in New York, Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire. If the project ever were to be a reality, Nestle officials say a bottling plant could bring 300 to 450 jobs to the region. Those wishing to comment at an upcoming meeting where Nestle will be discussed are asked to send a letter describing what they want to discuss to George L. Darey, chairman of the Fisheries and Wildlife Board, 1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough, MA 01581.

Water bottling idea raises residents' concerns [Friday, August 17, 2007]

MONTAGUE -- Area residents say that tapping into the water below the Montague Plains for bottling raises concerns about corporate control of a natural resource and the potential to drain water sources for towns in the Pioneer Valley. About 80 people, mostly from Montague, gathered at the Montague Grange on Thursday to share their concerns about the project and to discuss strategy to fight the project.

So far, Nestle Waters North America only plans to walk the Montague Plains to see if it's a suitable site. The state's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife Board, which owns 1,500 acres of the Montague Plains, granted Nestle permission. No one from Nestle was at Thursday's meeting, but company officials have stressed previously that they only pursue one out of every 10 sites they initially explore.

Nonetheless, people are concerned. "The main issue for me is that this is going to be a public resource that is going to be used for private profit," said Tom Spiro of Greenfield. "It's our water," said Amy Vickers, an Amherst-based water planning, policy and management consultant. "It belongs to us. It belongs to nature and it's worth fighting for." In the Northeast, Nestle bottles water under the names Poland Springs, based in Maine, and Deer Park, based in Allentown, Pa. Nestle is looking at eight to 10 other sites in Massachusetts, said Eileen Simonson, co-executive director of the Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee.

Nestle officials have stressed that they make sure any water they draw out won't harm the environment. But several people said they were concerned the company could draw away a valuable resource from Montague and the surrounding communities. "This would be a consumable use," Vickers said. "When they take that water out for spas in Phoenix or people on treadmills, that water is not coming back." Nestle must go back to the Fisheries and Wildlife Board and state Department of Environmental Protection if it wants to drill test wells for more extensive testing, said Simonson.

"My understanding of the agreement between (the state) and Northeast Utilities was that land was supposed to stay undisturbed, period," said Steve Burns of Turners Falls Road. Although the Montague Plains is permanently protected by the state under Article 97, the state Legislature can make certain exceptions to the law and it's unclear how the law applies to water, Simonson said. "We really don't know how the laws would relate to bottling water for a source."

It's also unclear what, if any role local officials would play in the process of Nestle since the issue is a relatively new one, said Selectman Allen Ross. "We're not looking at a veto power, it's more like a voice at a meeting. This is one area that hasn't been really challenged." Montague, a town that's struggling financially, also needs to consider the potential tax dollars and new job benefits.

Sam Lovejoy, a former selectman who was a major player in the fight against a proposed nuclear plant on the Montague Plains, added, "If Nestle wants to stick holes in the ground and tell us what we have, that's cool. Then they can go away."