



Poland Spring abandons plan to extract water in Shapleigh

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By Ellen W. Todd Sanford News Writer

SHAPLEIGH - Poland Spring has removed its test wells from a wildlife management area in Shapleigh and Newfield and no longer plans to pursue extracting spring water from the area, according to a spokesperson for the company.

The withdrawal of the 13 test wells and four spring wells from the Vernon Walker Wildlife Management Area is seen as a victory by local residents who opposed the large-scale water extraction from the aquifer that lies beneath the 4,000-acre wildlife preserve. The Vernon Walker Wildlife Management area is state owned and is managed by Maine's Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

"This is an example of local control at its best," said Shelly Gobeille, a Shapleigh resident and chair of Protect Our Water and Wildlife Resources (POWWR), as she watched the start of the dismantling process last week.

POWWR is a private, not-for-profit group of concerned citizens from Shapleigh and Newfield that formed in 2008 after learning of Nestlé Waters N.A.'s interest in the aquifer. Nestlé Waters is the parent company of Poland Spring.

Gobeille said in a press release that the removal of the wells "represents what is presumed to be the concluding stage of a... public controversy over the company's right to large-scale water extraction" in Shapleigh and Newfield.

The public controversy erupted early in 2008 when Poland Spring announced its plan to extract water from the aquifer. A tract of land belonging to the Town of Shapleigh was proposed as an extraction site and the company was proposing a test well on the town-owned site. Residents also learned that in 2006 and 2007, Nestlé had drilled at least 16 test wells in the Walker preserve, and that the company had done so with state approval and without public notice. The information intensified many residents' objections to Nestlé's proposal in 2008.

Public opposition grew and in September 2008 Shapleigh voters approved a six-month moratorium on any large-scale water extraction operation to allow the town's planning board time to work on an ordinance to regulate such proposals.

Citizens who attended the planning board's hearings on the proposed ordinance repeatedly asked for stronger regulations, according to POWWR's website, but felt they were not being heard.

"To add further insult, the citizens learned that the Board of Selectmen hired an 'independent' consultant, referred to them by Nestlé, to write the ordinance," the website states.

Citizens' continued opposition to the Poland Spring plan - and their elected officials' alleged inaction - prompted residents in both Shapleigh and Newfield to begin drawing up their own ordinances based on "the peoples' constitutional rights."

Shapleigh voters attending a special town meeting Feb. 28, 2009, approved the "Shapleigh Water Rights and Local Self-Government Ordinance" by a vote of 114 to 66. The ordinance bans large-scale water extraction on town-owned land, state-owned land or privately owned land.

Newfield voters approved a similar ordinance - "Newfield Water Rights and Local Self-Governance Ordinance" - on March 14 by a vote of 228 to 146.

Removal of the monitoring and test wells began July 22 after the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife's (IFW) approved a work plan outlining the procedures to be followed. The work was completed the same week, said Noah Keteyian, of Barton & Gingold, a public relations firm in Portland that represents Poland Spring.

Mark Dubois, Natural Resource Manager for Poland Spring, released the following statement regarding the removal of test wells: "We are no longer considering the development of a spring water source in that area and therefore the wells are not needed."

Gobeille said POWWR "will be working to educate citizens of other towns about Newfield's and Shapleigh's new ordinances, as challenges to local water rights arise elsewhere." She noted that the ordinances are the first of their kind to be passed in Maine.