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BALDREY: Emotions run high in Nestle water debate

[Keith Baldrey](#) / North Shore News

July 17, 2015 12:00 AM

Is B.C.'s fresh water the new oil?

Given the near-hysteria around a foreign corporation's plan to continue to extract a relatively tiny amount of groundwater from an aquifer deep in the ground, one might be tempted to make that link. But there is a crucial difference between the two.

First, oil (and natural gas) are sold on the international marketplace and our water is not. What we are witnessing amidst the furor over the plan to allow Nestle to do something it has been doing for 15 years are the contradictions and hypocrisy that exists on various sides of this controversy.

The fact that Nestle is the company involved in this is part of the reason for all the protests. It is not a popular foreign corporation to begin with, and the political left love to trash any idea of such a company getting access to anything to do with any of B.C.'s resources.

Typical of the misinformation that clouds this issue is an online petition that has rapidly picked up signatures. Its breathless title ("Nestle is about to suck B.C. dry") is, of course, completely fictitious and inflammatory.

Some perspective here.

Nestle has been extracting a small amount of B.C. groundwater annually for more than a decade; it is not touching lakes or streams; the amount of water it is buying amounts to a proverbial micro-drop in a bucket compared to our water supply; the water in question (located deep in an aquifer) would otherwise find its way into the

Fraser River tributary system if it wasn't extracted.

Finally, Nestle is not actually being "sold" the water. It is being charged a small administrative fee to continue to access it (that fee is roughly equivalent to accessing surface water from lakes and streams).

Back to the petition.

People who sign it should take note that in doing so, they are actually agreeing with the premise that B.C.'s fresh water can indeed be sold internationally.

All the petition asks for is that such sales come at a "fair price."

Enter former B.C. MLA Judi Tyabji, a zealous opponent of the very idea that we start selling B.C.'s fresh water.

When she got wind of the petition, she started a social media firestorm of her own when she posted on Facebook an analysis that pointed out it would be disastrous to start contractually "selling" Nestle or any other company fresh water for any price.

That's because such a move could trigger free trade provisions that would allow those companies access to B.C. fresh water forever.

Tyabji's post went semi-viral (it was "shared" more than 10,000 times on Facebook) and she attributes that to the emotions surrounding our fresh water.

"If we actually start to sell water rather than simply charge administrative fees to access it, it becomes a commodity under NAFTA and we then can't turn off the tap," she told me. "We can't treat water like a natural resource like natural gas or oil and sell it in the market place."

Tyabji is now leading her own charge to battle against what she calls "gross misinformation" being peddled by those who should know better, and she's getting a lot of attention (including from many folks who now wish they hadn't signed that petition).

"Spreading misinformation can be very dangerous. Protecting our water is more important than playing cheap politics," she said.

I don't expect the provincial government to change the rules regarding Nestle's water extraction activities, no matter how many people sign a petition.

But "water" will remain an emerging political issue.

There is controversy slowly brewing over a much more serious issue: the vast amounts of fresh water that will have to be used to extract natural gas should a liquefied natural gas industry actually get off the ground in B.C.

No, fresh water is not B.C.'s version of oil, at least not when it comes to selling it.

But in the political marketplace, how we use our water may soon become as heated an issue as oil.

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