

Bottled water industry trying to tap deeper into Michigan

By ANDREW GUY

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LANSING – The Perrier Group of America, the bull of the bottled water industry, is searching for new spring sources in the Midwest and the Great Lakes state tops their shortlist.

To meet growing demand for its Ice Mountain brand, the company is currently evaluating aquifers in Mecosta and Osceola counties to determine whether the sites meet proposed withdrawal demands and water quality standards.

“Michigan has exceptional water quality,” says Debbie Wudyka, spokesperson for the company’s proposed Ice Mountain project. “It’s one aspect that drew Perrier to the state.”

Perrier’s five year plan includes constructing a well to “mine” as much as 500 gallons of water per minute and a distribution facility to serve expanding markets in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin.

Before siting any facility, the company must receive approval from the state departments of agriculture and environmental quality. In an effort to do so, Perrier is currently conducting ecological assessments.

Wudyka asserts that the geology of west central Michigan, coupled with the region’s characteristic high levels of rainfall that speed aquifer recharge rates, enhances the region’s viability.

However, with state regulatory efforts focused on quality, not quantity, of the state’s extensive water supply, experts agree the basic information needed to make intelligent long-term management decisions is lacking.

Kevin Kincare, a glacial geologist with the Michigan Geologic Survey, says that companies like Perrier must perform extensive groundwater studies before developing the state's inland water resources. And he attributes that primarily to seriously deficient information on underground water resources.

"We're in a hole as far as our knowledge is concerned," Kincare said. "We've not had the money or the people to properly map the state's glacial aquifers."

Resource managers have a strong understanding of water recharge rates – a function of rainfall, slope of the land and soil type. However, any comprehensive picture of the overall water cycle, particularly the interconnectedness of underground aquifers, nearly all of which eventually feed the Great Lakes, is lacking, Kincare said.

"At the rate we're going it will take 200 years to map the state. I don't need or want that much job security."

According to the International Bottled Water Association, the industry trade organization, Michigan ranked 14th in the country with 57.1 million gallons of water extracted by the bottling industry in 1999. Bottlers in California, ranked number one, extracted more than 1.1 billion gallons.

Other Michigan plants include Absopure in Wayne County, Arbor Springs in Ann Arbor, Aquafina in Detroit and Country Fresh in Rockford.

Kincare supposes the quantities of water being removed by the water bottling industry is so small that it's not an issue, but he also acknowledges it could be sometime in the future.

While not related directly to the water bottling industry, there have been quiet indications that the state's water resource is growing increasingly stressed. Several

regions in the state, including the cities of Monroe, Saginaw, Rockford, and Alpena, have experienced water withdrawal problems in the past couple of years.

“As development spreads, the water cycle ebbs and there has been complaints,” says Rich Overmyer, the chief of the Department of Environmental Quality’s Non-Community Water Supply unit. “However, in Michigan, the law of the land is such that owners have a right to utilize the water under their land.”

Overmyer’s unit regulates over 11,000 sources such as schools, campgrounds and rest areas. And while water consumption by various individual users is indirectly tracked, the majority of water bottlers in the state are not required to report withdrawals. Therefore, specific extraction statistics on the growing industry are hard to come by. Further, the agency has not established a limit on how much can be withdrawn.

Thus far, the DEQ has not taken a concentrated look at the long-term implications of such withdrawals, Overmyer said, noting the agency is primarily concerned with the “here and now” aspects of regulatory compliance like facility construction, immediate aquifer recharge rates and water quality standards.

The long-term question, Overmyer asserts, is do we want someone coming in here and selling our water resource? A commodity no different than timber, oil or gas. In his opinion, someday the state is going to have to better regulate the bottling industry and track water use more closely.

“It only makes sense,” Overmyer said. “Throughout history water has been an extremely valuable resource and its not going to be there forever.”