

Support for Substitute Re: SB 422

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An Act Concerning Water Rates, Public Drinking Water Supply Emergencies and the Sellers of Bottled Water

Dear Planning and Development Committee

It would be comforting to think of Connecticut as somehow removed from the day-to-day destruction we see in some of the world's most ruthlessly polluting industries – like coal mining or the clear cutting of rain forests. But bottling water is an extractive industry with profound, and in many cases irreversible, consequences. It might look neat, clean and robotic. And in some ways it is certainly not labor intensive – which by the way, means it produces very few jobs, and most of those are low-paying wage work that add nothing to our skill base, let alone our tax base.

But harvesting water, making billions of plastic water bottles annually, and trucking it across state lines is still an extractive industry. And as with coal, oil, or tropical hardwoods, the supply of that basic natural resource is finite. Even if the water gets replenished, we know from the new data – which by the way, the Metropolitan District Commission's models ignore – that with global warming the resupply of that water is more sporadic and uncertain than ever.

States and countries that rely upon the extraction of such basic resources typically find themselves at the mercy of corporate interests whose decisions are motivated by profit and not - despite carefully crafted rhetoric to the contrary - upon concern for the communities in which they operate. It is no wonder that bottling companies want to come here. We have - for now - an abundant supply of water.

And the market is booming. Authors Snitow, Kaufman and Fox, in their 2007 book, "Thirst: Fighting the Corporate Theft of our Water," tell us that there is now "even bottled water for dogs." In order to sell water, however, a bottling company must first persuade municipalities that its presence will be beneficial, that it will embody that magic and alluring phrase, "economic development."

Now, we, the citizens supporting SB 422, are not opposed to development per se. We are not mindlessly championing "the environment" and ignoring immediate human needs. We know that our tax base needs to grow, that schools, roads and social services must be maintained. But not all development is created equal. Some businesses can be both economically and ecologically friendly. Water bottling is not one of them.

An extractive industry that demands significant rate and tax concessions gives little back. Robotized plants generate little opportunity to spin off, or multiply economic growth. And it is all too clear that water bottling potentially puts our water supply at risk. As things stand, the State cannot compel a large industrial water user to cease operating until the reservoirs stand at 10% of capacity. This is not merely an environmental issue; it is an economic one. Imagine how many businesses will pass us over in favor of other states, a few years down the road, if it appears that our reservoirs and our aquifers can no longer sustain a rich and varied economy.

That is why I support Senator Bye's bill, SB 422. Each of its three provisions – governing drought restrictions, bulk water rate discounts and discharge fees – addresses a vital aspect of water bottling and makes the industry more accountable to principles of sound business, ecology and state planning.