

Background and update for water bottling prohibition

January 31, 2019

My name is Bruce Gibbons, and I live in Merville, in the Comox Valley. I am here today to address the Board about the issue of protecting groundwater in the Comox Valley, the Strathcona Region, Vancouver Island and all over British Columbia. As you are most likely aware, the Provincial Government approved a groundwater extraction licence for a resident of Merville to extract up to 10,000 liters of water per day from the Comox Valley aquifer, and bottle and sell that water. I formed a group called Merville Water Guardians to oppose the water licence, oppose the rezoning application and to achieve reforms to the Water Sustainability Act to protect the groundwater aquifers of BC. I filed an appeal against the water licence in March, but after a lengthy process with the Environmental Appeal Board the appeal was dismissed. There is a serious flaw in the Water Sustainability Act that denies appeal of a water licence unless the licence physically detrimentally affects your land, not your water, not your access to water. The Water Sustainability Act does not protect my water or my access to water. I find that appalling and I am fighting for changes to the Act. The CVRD eventually denied the applicant's application for rezoning which effectively stopped him from bottling the water on his property. However, the applicant stated his intent to go ahead with the water bottling whatever way he can and to that end he has applied to the provincial government to amend his licence to allow him to truck the water from his well and bottle it at a site that allows water bottling. The applicant publicly stated his intent to go to the Strathcona Regional District (SRD) to set up his facility for bottling the water. I immediately contacted some of the SRD Directors to apprise them of the situation and I am very pleased to say the Board acted very quickly and decisively to block his attempts. And I was very happy to see that the Board also took decisive action in drafting and submitting a resolution to the BC Government advising them that the SRD does not support approvals of licences for the extraction of groundwater anywhere to be sold for commercial purposes such as water bottling, bulk water export or private sales. I have been collecting signatures on a petition to the BC Government asking them to stop approval of groundwater licences under the Water Sustainability Act for the bottling and commercial sale of groundwater from our aquifers. To date we have over 1,300 signatures on that petition. I have recently also posted an online petition which has over 1,200 signatures to date, and I also recently posted a video challenge which I sent to all MLAs challenging them to set aside political differences and take action together to protect our groundwater. We have over 300 followers on our Facebook page and a large group of supporters who feel strongly about this issue and about the need for the government to protect our groundwater.

Without water, farmers cannot produce our food, the local food that so many people desire and rely on. Without water, there is no life. We are facing population growth that will put more demand on our aquifers and we are already seeing the negative effects of climate change impact the quality and quantity of water in the summer drought period. We experienced level 4 drought all over Vancouver Island and in many other areas of BC this past summer. We have seen record dry months, record heat and every indication is that climate change is very real and will likely only get worse. Rivers and streams are drying up. Fish habitats are disappearing. Residents and farmers are being told to seriously conserve water. Our food security is at risk. Yet we have a provincial water licence for commercial profit that will allow extraction of water, from the aquifer we all rely on, despite the level 4 drought. There is not enough information known about the health of our aquifers and the recharge of those aquifers in the future to risk bottling and selling any of the water.

I have made presentations to the Village of Cumberland, the City of Courtenay, the CVRD (by way of our petition) and I am scheduled to present to the Town of Comox asking them to change their bylaws to prohibit the bottling of groundwater in their zoning bylaws. Cumberland has changed their bylaws

to prohibit the bottling of groundwater. The CVRD has a bylaw change pending, and the City of Courtenay has passed a motion to prohibit bottling of groundwater and has referred that motion back to staff for further information. I have also been in touch with the Councils in all those areas encouraging them to support the Strathcona Regional District Resolution that was passed on Jan 24th to protect our groundwater.

WHEREAS water is an essential resource upon which all life, including all ecosystems and all local communities depend

AND WHEREAS water is a public heritage and a public trust for present and future generations and access to water must not be compromised by commercial operations relating to commercial water bottling or commercial bulk water exports.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Premier of British Columbia and the Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development be requested to immediately cease the licensing and extraction of groundwater for commercial water bottling and/or bulk water exports from aquifers."

I, and all our followers strongly support the resolution that will be presented to the AVICC in April, and ultimately to the UBCM. I sincerely believe that the request to the Provincial Government needs to be direct and succinct. Local governance, better consultation by the provincial government with local governments, better science before approval of licences would all be better than the current situation and would all be desirable outcomes. However, the fact of the matter is that we cannot settle for just incremental improvements. We need to protect our groundwater definitively, now and forever. We must clearly request that the provincial government cease the approval of groundwater licences for the extraction of groundwater from all BC aquifers to be sold for commercial profit, such as water bottling, bulk water exports or private sales.

Water is our most precious resource. Water is life. We must do everything we can to protect and conserve it. I am asking you to support the SRD resolution to protect our groundwater and I implore you to approve the resolution and push it forward at the AVICC, and the UBCM. I admire and applaud the SRD Board for their vision in acting quickly and decisively to protect our groundwater for everyone on Vancouver Island and all over British Columbia, and on behalf of our supporters in the Comox Valley I say thank you to the SRD and to you for your courage, your conviction, your vision and your leadership.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.

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