

MAINE VOICES

Maine has water, water everywhere,

Taking 250,000 gallons a day seems like a lot, but a single inch of Sebago Lake has 800 million.

As the former state geologist, I am often asked if Mainers should be concerned about our water resources.

It's an important question, notwithstanding the fact that we are blessed with a superabundance of fresh water. That is probably why, long before my time, the Maine Legislature initiated a water monitoring program with the U.S. Geological Survey, and we now have more than 100 years of valuable stream flow and precipitation records from which hydro-geologists can accurately calculate Maine's water cycle.

The recent failure of a proposed contract between Poland Spring and the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Wells Wa-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ter District makes it clear that some important facts about Maine's water resources are being overlooked.

Maine's water resources are renewed each year by the hydrological cycle of evaporation and precipitation over land.

Consider the following:

- Our average annual rainfall is 42 inches, or 24 trillion gallons;

- Run-off to streams, rivers and over landscape amounts to 12 trillion gallons;

- Evaporation equals about 7 trillion gallons; and

- Infiltration to groundwater is about 5 trillion gallons.

Furthermore, groundwater maps reveal glacial deposits

of high-yield sand and gravel aquifers that occupy nearly 1,300 square miles of Maine's landscape (an area slightly larger than all of York County) and the water recharge to these aquifers is about 240 billion gallons annually.

Despite these facts, some would have you believe that Maine is on the verge of a water shortfall, and that every drop that is saved is stored for the future. If water were a non-renewable resource, like coal or copper, that would be true.

Fortunately, water is constantly renewed through rain and snowfall. The key is ensuring our uses are sustainable – that we take no more water than is naturally replenished.

That is the role of state and local regulation, in addition to the users themselves, who can ill-afford to run out of water.

Last year Maine passed new groundwater extraction

and lots of drops to drink

rules that strengthened the already comprehensive set of regulations governing water withdrawals. As many as six different agencies control water withdrawal permits.

The extent of public oversight here should comfort those who worry that private companies might deplete the resource.

When we hear numbers like 250,000 gallons a day – the approximate amount of water Poland Spring wanted to buy from the water district – it sounds like a very large amount.

But to put it in perspective, consider that a single inch of Sebago Lake contains about 800 million gallons of water.

During a typical July, approximately 3.7 billion gallons of water from Sebago Lake evaporate naturally. That's more than five times the total amount of water Poland Spring wanted to use each year.

The Branch Brook aquifer is

one of the most intensely researched aquifers in Maine, and for nearly 100 years the Kennebunk-Kennebunkport Water District has proven itself to be an worthy steward of this important resource. The amount of water the district proposed to sell is tiny compared to the size of the resource, which is constantly being replenished.

Not selling the water does not keep it in the ground for future use. This is spring water, and it is constantly discharging and running into the ocean. In fact, the state says it must continue to flow despite the withdrawal or its use will be stopped.

Despite the abundance of water resources in Maine, the extraction of this valuable resource deserves our constant vigilance and protection. Under the proposed contract, the water district would have held the withdrawal permit, so they would have retained control.

Poland Spring would have been required to provide annual reports to the water district and state agencies regarding its water extraction activities.

The only difference between the district selling water to Poland Spring or adding new commercial customers in its service area is that a sale requires a separate permitting process, guaranteeing more oversight than would otherwise occur.

Every day in Maine, water is used and sold for a multitude of purposes. How can selling excess water for people to drink be a bad thing, while so many other uses (making shampoo, paper, beer, computer chips, furniture – the list goes on) are never given a thought?

I suspect there may have been other issues at play, and encourage a dialogue that is grounded in scientific facts.