

Speech, Day Out of Time, July 25, 2016

My name is Geneva Omann, I am a member of the WATER Group, WATER is an acronym it stands for We Advocate Thorough Environmental Review. I thank Forrest for inviting me to speak at this wonderful event where we are celebrating World Water Appreciation Day, a Day Out of Time, Time as Art. I want to address what the WATER Group is all about in the context of World Water Appreciation Day.

Let Me Start with a Brief History

2013 it was announced to the public that CG had purchased the former Dannon/Coca Cola building and would be setting up shop without an environmental review. Immediately the community mobilized to put pressure on local governmental agencies to either stop the project or at the very least to demand a full environmental review before allowing operations. Part of the reason for this outcry was that the Dannon/Coca Cola plant had not had a serious environmental review. What is called a mitigated negative declaration was prepared--something that is supposed to identify potential negative impacts and mitigate them-- but it was ignored by Dannon/CC and not enforced by Siskiyou County, the relevant oversight agency. People in the surrounding neighborhood had problems with their wells and some local waterways appeared to have been contaminated.

In addition, a significant part of our local economy is tourism and there is community concern that a beverage manufacturing plant will lead to environmental degradation that will reduce tourism.

The WATER group formed out of this turmoil: to advocate for preservation of natural resources and a healthy environment; to advocate for long-range community planning and careful growth; to protect all citizens and prevent community deterioration; to encourage community-wide participation through educating the public about these issues, and especially to stand up for the principle that the public, not just a private corporation, has a right to have a say in what happens to a community's resources and environment.

After two and a half years of public pressure and litigation initiated by the WATER group, CG and Siskiyou County finally announced this spring that an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) will be done. What an EIR is is defined by the California Environmental Quality Act, so there is a clearly defined procedure for how the study happens and there are a couple of places where the public can participate in the evaluation and development of the report.

So where we are today is that the county has hired an environmental consulting firm to do the report, and the firm has prepared a notice of preparation---a summary of what all will be studied. This is one of those steps that is open to public comment, and today was the deadline for the

public to submit comments about the NOP. The WATER group as well as other organizations and many individuals have submitted comments that now must be addressed in the next phase, where the consulting firm will produce a draft Environmental Impact Report that will again be open for public scrutiny.

The WATER group will be contracting with environmental and legal experts to help us evaluate the EIR process to ensure that the report protects the community from any potential negative impacts of having the plant operate here. And one of the options that must be evaluated by law is that of no action--no project--no plant. If there are environmental impacts that cannot be adequately mitigated, then there would be no plant.

If you want to receive updates on the EIR process, I invite you to go to the WATER table and get on our email list--- we will be sending out updates on the EIR process. The draft EIR is expected to be released this fall.

But what I really want to talk about is the larger context of this local project and its relationship to World Water Appreciation Day.

Water is a Human Right

The idea that water is a basic human right is being codified in local and international human rights laws. For example,

International human rights laws recognize the human right to safe drinking water for personal and domestic uses, including drinking, food preparation, washing of clothes, personal sanitation, and personal and household hygiene. And these international laws further assert that states, that is governments, are obligated to ensure everyone's access to a sufficient amount of safe drinking water. This is often referred to a water as a public trust.

Water as a human right is codified in the California Constitution affirming that water should be conserved for the "interest of the people and public welfare" (California Constitution Article 10 section 2). California Water Code (section 106) explicitly states that "the use of water for domestic purposes is the highest use of water." California Health and Safety Code [section 116270(a)] guarantees that "[e]very citizen of California has the right to pure and safe drinking water."

The Human Right to Water Bill in California, passed in 2012, renews California's commitment to universal access to clean water by making the human right to water a centerpiece of state

policy. It requires all relevant state agencies to prioritize the human right to water in policy, programming, and budgetary activities.

Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter On Care for Our Common Home states, "Access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights." In other words, the human right to water is the foundation of all other human rights.

And of course for millennia, many cultural traditions have recognize water as being SACRED, an entity with a spirit, something to be respected, revered, and honored and protected.

Unfortunately, these declarations of water as a human right have not stopped the surge in water privatization that is taking place globally. Our global economic system challenges the assertion that water is a human right and rather asserts that water is a commodity--just another thing to be sold for profit. And we are not human beings with rights, we are simply consumers, our only role in our economy is to buy stuff. Declarations of water as a human right have not stopped industrial and agricultural pollution of freshwater, have not stopped fracking which significantly pollutes freshwater. In today's economic context, these declarations of water as a human right are not interpreted to mean the state must guarantee water as a human right but rather that the state will guarantee a profit to companies who sell water.

So What Must We Do??

The human right to water will only become a reality when we the people stand up for that right. That is what we are doing here today, that is what the WATER group and the larger community are doing in challenging the CG project, that is what the people in Weed are doing to challenge the Roseburg water grab, that is what people in McCloud are doing to challenge the Artesian Spring water company---acting locally about a global human rights issue. It is a moral issue, not an economic one.

We can challenge water privatization with litigation and by citizen-lead initiatives to change our water laws, as is happening here. But in the present political/economic system, where money buys power within the established channels and mainstream parties, the public must sometimes step outside those established channels to be heard, to have a say, and to have a chance at changing things for the better. Our enthusiasm, our unrelenting commitment, our activism, our citizenship can make all the difference. That enthusiasm, commitment, and activism can be expressed through boycotts, street demonstrations, blockades, civil disobedience, voting and agitating for third parties, strikes, sit-ins, factory takeovers, competing in local, county, and school board elections, writing newspaper letters-to-the editor, making contacts through social media, through cultural art, music and theater events, and events like this one today. Almost anything we do together to assert our humanity, to support each other for human rights, social

fairness, economic equality, for peace, and for protection of the earth increases hope for humanity's future.

We must keep water as a public trust!