On July 2, Nestlé announced it was selling its bottled water business in Canada to another huge water bottle, Ice River Springs.

At the time, we viewed this as an indication of success in our long campaign against bottled water – and against Nestlé in particular. For more than a decade, Council of Canadians chapters and supporters, First Nations and other community groups have been raising awareness and speaking out against Nestlé’s water profiting business. We have called on people to boycott Nestlé products, demanded better regulations, and engaged tens of thousands of people in conversations about water commodification and why we must keep water public and protected. It was a hard-fought victory to see Nestlé leave Canada. Unfortunately, it was one that was short-lived.

In a surprise announcement in early September, Nestlé said the sale to Ice River was off, citing delays in getting regulatory approval from the Competition Bureau. Coincidentally (perhaps), just a few days earlier, the government of Ontario announced it would extend a four-year-old moratorium against issuing new bottled water taking permits – this time, until April 2021.

Disappointingly, this is the third time the moratorium has been extended. Tens of thousands of Council of Canadians supporters have called on the Ontario government to make this moratorium permanent, to phase out all existing permits, and to give communities a real say in decisions affecting their local groundwater.

NEW REGULATIONS
In early October, the Ontario government proposed additional regulations that require bottled water corporations seeking permits to get approval from the local municipality first, giving communities the right to simply refuse. The details of how this will be implemented are not clear yet and there are some substantial loopholes in the proposal. Still, this is a remarkable development and a direct result of fierce and persistent community opposition.

One loophole is that municipalities will only have the right to refuse a new or expanded bottled water permit for quantities greater than 379,000 litres of groundwater extraction per day. This is an arbitrary number that does not take into account the different situations each municipality faces when planning for future water takings and population growth. It also could result in multiple permits being issued for quantities just under that limit.

The other glaring weakness in the proposed changes is that municipal approvals would be irrevocable for five years. This encourages backroom dealings and lobbying by deep-pocketed corporations. It also disenfranchises the community since voting out a municipal council that gave an approval will not stop the permit application from moving forward.

Given how quickly our climate is changing and the pressures these changes are putting on groundwater supplies everywhere, municipalities should be able to revoke their support for water-takings at any time. This would also give municipalities some power to compel bottled water companies to honour any promises they make in exchange for municipal approvals including local job creation and other community investments.

Corporations like Nestlé take our water, what should be a shared public resource, put it in environmentally damaging single-use plastic bottles, and sell it for massive profits. Both Ontario and B.C. are battlegrounds to stop Nestlé’s water grab – and we are keeping up the fight.

The most powerful force against the commodification of water is an informed and organized network of people who are committed to safeguarding water. Your support continues to make all the difference.

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