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EDITORIAL

McCloud water bottling plant is refreshing arrival

The timber mills that formed the economic backbone of McCloud and many other rural towns for a century are largely silent, but the hunger for the north state's resources continues to create job opportunities.

Hunger? Make that the thirst.

By purchasing the California Cedar Products mill in McCloud, Nestle Waters North America is swimming with a strong current that is shifting the base of Siskiyou County's economy from harvesting trees to harvesting water. It joins Mt. Shasta Spring Water, Crystal Geysers and Dannon in tapping the perpetual fountains that gush from Mt. Shasta.

The deal provides a badly needed replacement for the CalCedar's pencil-stock mill, which announced its shutdown last year. In addition to the \$60 million investment in a building on the mill site, Nestle expects the bottling plant to employ 60 workers when it opens in 2006 and eventually up to 240. That would be a respectable payroll anywhere, but in McCloud -- population circa-1,500 -- it will make the difference between the town's life and death.

Some environmentalists and other zealous guardians of the north state's water see something nefarious in the bottlers' tapping the springs, but their wariness is misguided.

Water may be captured at the source and trucked to homes and offices under Nestle's Arrowhead label. Or it may run through California's vast network of reservoirs, pumps, canals and treatment plants before filling someone's glass from a faucet. Either way, people will slake their thirst.

In any case, drinking water is a drop in the ocean of diversions that irrigate farms, grease the wheels of industrial production and keep lawns green in the Southern California desert. It's conceivable that the perpetual fountains coming out of Mt. Shasta could someday be overdrawn, but it will take more than four water bottlers.

Indeed, in the long run the environmentalists probably have an ally in water companies, whose businesses depend on maintaining Mt. Shasta in as pristine a state as possible -- if only to guard their image of purity. There is no such thing as a perfectly clean industry, but water bottling must come close.