

Mainers Help Water Flow to Haitians

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By Bill Nemitz

Like most Mainers, Alex Ronfeldt of Limington awoke Thursday morning with Haiti on his mind. A retired ship captain who back in the day sailed into Port-au-Prince two or three times a year, Ronfeldt knew all too well that at this early stage in the ravaged city's recovery from Tuesday's earthquake, one need stands out above all the rest.

Water. Clean, transportable, drinkable water.

So here Ronfeldt stood in the lobby of the Poland Spring bottling plant in Hollis, explaining to a rather perplexed receptionist that he'd yet to hear a word about Poland Spring on the news and was wondering if "you people are planning on doing something to help all those people out down there."

In a word, yes.

We hear a lot these days about Poland Spring and its parent company, Nestle Waters North America, and most of it isn't good.

Critics warn (with precious little in the way of hard proof) that the multinational conglomerate is draining Maine dry. At the same time, cynics marvel at how Poland Spring has mastered the art of taking what comes out of the faucet for free and selling it back to us in plastic bottles.

Then along comes a catastrophe like the magnitude 7.0 earthquake that pulverized much of Haiti and suddenly bottled water, on this day at least, makes all the sense in the world. With water, the still-mobilizing rescue effort can at least buy a little time. Without water – and plenty of it – many, many more Haitians will die.

Meet Trevor Emery. As "Northeast transportation resource" for Poland Spring, his normal workday revolves around getting the finished product from the bottling plant to a warehouse in Seabrook, N.H., then on to retail outlets throughout the region.

But Thursday, for Emery, was anything but normal.

Laptop on the table in front of him, cell phone at the ready, he was by midmorning well into the process of lining up trucking companies to haul 10 trailer loads of water – about 360,000 one-liter bottles – from Seabrook to a staging area in Miami. It's but a small piece of Nestle's pledge to donate \$1 million worth of water, at least for now, to people suffering through a disaster that by all indications won't be under control, let alone resolved, anytime soon.

Emery has been down this road before. Within hours of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, he had water moving to ground zero in Manhattan. He did the same four years later when Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

“This is what makes me tick,” said Emery, who lives in Hollis. “The word that comes to mind is that it’s an honor.”

You see, beyond the sprawling Poland Spring plant, beyond the peaceful Hollis landscape crisscrossed only by snowmobile trails, Emery has seen Third World poverty up close and personal.

A member of the Stroudwater Christian Church in Portland, he traveled last summer to an orphanage on the island of Ometepe in Nicaragua, where he and his fellow missionaries helped build a new feeding station – he remembers faucet water so murky that people here in Maine “wouldn’t even swim in it.”

“It’s very eye-opening,” Emery said. “Being from the U.S., we literally have everything at our fingertips. And I think in general folks kind of take that for granted. If we want a clean, cold drink of water, we can go down to the local variety store and pick up a bottle of Poland Spring. In those countries, they don’t have that.”

Tamara Risser, Poland Spring’s process improvement manager, came home from trips to Honduras in the past two years with the same perspective. As a member of the Portland Rotary Club, she went there to help install “slow-sand” filtration systems in a village where the children were routinely dying of hepatitis because of the foul water supply.

(The first year, Risser made the trip on her own vacation time. Last year, after hearing what she was doing, her higher-ups at Poland Spring told her to keep the vacation time – this trip was on the company.)

In Maine, Risser said, she works in a state-of-the-art lab with an incubator and a carefully calibrated thermometer for testing water samples “so we know everything’s perfect.”

To test the water down there, she said, “they’ve got one of those Styrofoam chicken incubators that you plug in, and they lose power four times a day. So you take a deep breath and say, ‘OK, We can still figure this out.’”

All of which goes to show there are two ways to interpret the fact that within the next few days, pallet after pallet of Poland Spring water will be off-loaded onto the crowded airport tarmac in Port-au-Prince and soon thereafter find its way to multitudes who, even as you read this, are dying for a drink.

Is it a faceless corporation using a tiny fraction of its output to burnish its public image? Perhaps – although it should be noted that the only attention Poland Spring called to its Haiti relief effort was a small press release on a business news wire.

Or is it a group of Maine workers who went to work Thursday and, in their own small way, found a way to help?

“This is tangible,” Emery said, tapping his laptop. “I can go home today and really feel good about the fact that the efforts our team put forth today will have a direct effect on Haiti, that our bottles of water over the next few days will be on the ground and helping.”

Standing there in the Poland Spring lobby, Ronfeldt, the retired ship captain on a mission, explained to Risser that he'd driven over from Limington not just to see if Poland Spring was stepping up and doing the right thing, but also to offer a few words of advice about how they might get water from Maine all the way to Port-au-Prince.

Risser listened with interest. It turned out that some of Ronfeldt's ideas – How about a C-130 airlift directly to Haiti from Pease International Airport in New Hampshire? – were already being considered.

Then, Risser invited Ronfeldt to come in and chat with Emery, the guy who makes the trucks run on time.

Ronfeldt smiled and shook his head.

"You guys are doing something," he said, heading for the door. "That's all I'm concerned about."

Chalk one up for the multinational.

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