Energy Company's Shocking Plan to Spray Clouds with Toxic Chemical to Increase Rainfall -- and Make Hydropower Profits

The practice known as 'cloud seeding' has been done in California for decades. But the environmental costs are high and the regulations for corporations nonexistent.

A mountain hamlet of fewer than 3000 residents in California's far-northern Siskiyou County, is taking up a new struggle: to prevent PG&E from seeding the region's clouds. The practice of 'cloud seeding' is a kind of weather modification in which silver iodide, a Class-C toxin, is disbursed aerially or from ground-based towers in an effort to induce rain.

On May 24, the Mt. Shasta City Council voted to put the Mt. Shasta Community Water Rights and Self-Government Ordinance on the November ballot. The objective of the ordinance, which was brought to the City Council by an ad-hoc group called the Mt. Shasta Community Rights Project, is to prohibit chemical cloud seeding and corporate water extraction in the city. If adopted, the law will protect the right to "sustainably access, use, consume, and preserve water drawn from natural water cycles;" more broadly, it will defend "the rights of citizens to self-government and the rights of natural communities and ecosystems to exist, flourish, and evolve."

Despite the fact that Mt. Shasta is a small town with a strong liberal, environmental bent, and about 85 percent of people approached by organizers are in favor of a strong measure to protect the town's water, the ordinance is politically fraught. If it becomes law, the ordinance will not merely prevent cloud seeding and water extraction -- it will empower citizens and the City Council to vote down similar proposals in the future.

Such an effort is not as benign, nor as easy, as it might at first appear. On the heels of their six year battle with Nestle, organizers in Mt. Shasta know that in order to secure the region from corporate resource extraction in the long-term, they need to do more than just say no to each threat as it appears; they need to circumvent legal precedent, which generally rules in favor of corporate resource extraction.
corporations. In order to do that, they need to overturn both state and federal law.

Water policy in California is infamous complicated, and the state, which is the world’s seventh largest economy and one of the world’s most vital agricultural regions, is facing an increasingly severe water crisis. Proponents of the Mt. Shasta ordinance say that it has far-reaching implications, both in protecting water and in empowering citizens; in the words of one resident testifying before the City Council on May 24, “this ordinance is the embryo of change for our state.”

Mt. Shasta, Source of Northern California’s Waters

In the Mt. Shasta City Park, at the bottom of a wooded hill, in a grove of yellow pine and cedar, clear water comes bubbling out of the ground, splashing over rocks and rushing to form a sparkling creek, green with watercress and lined with horsetail and huckleberry. This spring, a sign announces, is the headwaters of the Sacramento River. As it flows south through the Central Valley toward its drainage in San Francisco Bay, the Sacramento River provides 75 percent of Northern California’s water.
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