

Alaska Town Eyes Shipping Water Abroad



Private companies are looking to sell water from the Blue Lake reservoir to thirsty customers in the Middle East and other water-stressed places around the world.

Photograph by Hannah Keller

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This story is part of a [special series](#) that explores the global water crisis. For more, visit [National Geographic's Freshwater website](#).

Can Alaska, with its deep, wide lakes, and sparse population, quench the world's thirst? An opportunistic American company thinks it can, despite many logistical hurdles and questions about transporting freshwater in bulk across the seas.

The town of [Sitka](#) in Southeastern Alaska features a distinctive cobalt jewel: the Blue Lake reservoir, a lake fed by abundant rain, snow and glacial runoff, connected by pipeline to the local

deepwater port. For nearly a decade, the town has tried to turn this ample, pure freshwater resource into a commodity for thirsty buyers in the lower 48 states—and even overseas. It has offered contracts to sell up to 9.5 billion gallons a year, or about 8 percent of the reservoir's volume, to interested buyers at a rate of one cent per gallon.

Several companies have tried and failed to make the venture profitable. But Terry Trapp, a Colorado businessman who is partnering with San Antonio-based [S2C Global Systems](#), believes he may have a willing market in the Middle East.

“There are water shortages and people who need water all over the world,” said Trapp. “But the people in the most dire straits are in the Middle East.”

Trapp's [True Alaska Bottling Company](#) already has a water bottling plant in Sitka and now the partnership, Alaska Resource Management, is trying to be the first company in the world to sell bulk water. It currently has an annual contract for 9.1 million gallons per day—about a third of Sitka's available water—and is developing hubs to receive ocean-going water ships and distribute water to the Persian Gulf States. S2C Global Systems says the first hub will be an Indian port on the Arabian Sea.

The cost and logistics of shipping, receiving and distributing bulk water are formidable. Trapp says he is looking to ship water in tankers across the oceans, but is also considering floating it in polyethylene bags.

“Anytime you do something that's never been done before, you're going to have a lot of challenges,” said Trapp.

Though no one has attempted to ship this quantity of bulk water before, the possibility of selling off the freshwater of water-rich northern countries has tantalized many. The Canadian government has been embroiled in debates over bulk water projects for years, and the conservative [Fraser Institute](#) of Vancouver released a report this month highlighting the benefits of water exports.

But the [Council of Canadians](#), a civic organization promoting progressive policies, has vilified bulk water exports and generated a powerful public awareness campaign around them.

Meera Karunanathan, a national water campaigner for the council, says bulk water projects like the one in Sitka will not solve the water crises in [India](#) or countries in the Middle East that may be targeted for bulk sales.

“There are more sustainable solutions like rainwater harvesting,” Karunanathan said. “This [Sitka] project will not serve the environment in any way.”

But Garry White, executive director of the [Sitka Economic Development Association](#), argues that removing 8 percent of the watershed flow every year will not harm the environment because much of it is already being lost to the ocean.

“This water is falling into the ocean less than a mile from the lake,” said White. “The community sees an opportunity to take this resource that flows out into the ocean and make it a driver for us.”

Plus, water is a renewable resource.

“Unlike oil, water is replenished,” said Trapp.

But even if Sitka’s water is plentiful and the climate continues to feed the reservoir at a steady rate, others doubt that bulk water will ever be a viable business, because of the challenges created by transporting it long distances.

“If that water sits in the hold of a tanker for weeks traveling across the ocean, when it arrives it’s not spring water anymore; you’re going to have to clean it up,” said James McNiven, a professor of public administration at [Dalhousie University](#) in Nova Scotia who has studied the potential of Canada’s bulk water industry. “As a business proposition this gets to be very expensive and chances are the economics don’t work.”