

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

# Forest Service orders Arrowhead bottled water company to shut down California pipeline



Water flows from a pipe beside one of the sites in the San Bernardino Mountains where the company BlueTriton Brands collects water for bottling. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

**By Ian James**  
Staff Writer


In a decision that could end a years-long battle over commercial extraction of water from public lands, the U.S. Forest Service has ordered the company that sells Arrowhead bottled water to shut down a pipeline and other infrastructure it uses to collect and transport water from springs in the San Bernardino Mountains.

The Forest Service notified BlueTriton Brands in a letter last month, saying its application for a new permit has been denied.


District Ranger Michael Nobles wrote in the July 26 letter that the company “must cease operations” in the San Bernardino National Forest and submit a plan for removing all its pipes and equipment from federal land.

The company has [challenged the denial](#) in court.

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Environmental activists praised the decision.

“It’s a huge victory after 10 years,” said Amanda Frye, an activist who has campaigned against the taking of water from the forest. “I’m hoping that we can restore Strawberry Creek, have its springs flowing again, and get the habitat back.”

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She and other opponents say BlueTriton’s operation has dramatically reduced creek flow and is causing significant environmental harm.

The Forest Service announced the decision one month after a local environmental group, Save Our Forest Assn., [filed a lawsuit](#) that alleged agency was illegally allowing the company to continue operating under a permit that had expired.

The company has denied that its use of water is harming the environment and has argued that it should be allowed to continue piping water from the national forest.

BlueTriton Brands and its predecessors “have continuously operated under a series of special-use permits for nearly a century,” the company said in an email.

“This denial has no legal merit, is unsupported by the facts, and negatively impacts the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians,” the company said, adding that the tribe uses a portion of the water that passes through the pipeline and relies on that water for firefighting needs.

The tribe declined to comment and referred questions about the lawsuit to BlueTriton.

If the Forest Service decision stands, it would prevent the company from using the namesake source of its brand, Arrowhead 100% Mountain Spring Water.

The springs in the mountains north of San Bernardino, which have been a source for bottled water for generations, are named after an arrowhead-shaped natural rock formation on the mountainside.

State officials have said that the first facilities to divert water in the Strawberry Creek watershed were [built in 1929](#), and the system expanded over the years as additional boreholes were drilled into the mountainside.



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At the base of the mountain and near the company's water pipeline stands the long-closed [Arrowhead Springs hotel](#) property, which the San Manuel tribe bought in 2016. The company has said that [under a decades-old agreement](#), a portion of the water that flows through the 4.5-mile pipeline goes to the Arrowhead Springs property, and a portion of the water is delivered to a roadside tank and hauled on trucks to a bottling plant.

The Forest Service has been charging a permit fee of \$2,500 per year. There has been no charge for the water.

Controversy over the issue erupted when the [Desert Sun reported](#) in 2015 that the Forest Service was allowing Nestle to siphon water using a permit that listed 1988 as the expiration date.

The Forest Service then [began a review](#) of the permit, and in 2018 [granted a new permit](#) for up to five years. The revelations about Nestle piping water from the forest sparked an [outpouring of opposition](#) and prompted several complaints to California

regulators questioning the company's water rights claims, which led to a lengthy [investigation](#) by state water regulators.

BlueTriton took over the bottled water business in 2021 when Nestle's North American bottled water division was purchased by private-equity firm One Rock Capital Partners and investment firm Metropoulos & Co. (Last month, BlueTriton and Primo Water Corp. [announced](#) plans to merge and form a new company.)

State officials determined last year that the company has been unlawfully diverting much of the water without valid water rights — agreeing with Frye and others, who had questioned the company's claims and presented historical documents. The State Water Resources Control Board [voted to order the company](#) to halt its “unauthorized diversions” of water. But BlueTriton [sued to challenge](#) that decision, contending that the process was rife with problems.



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In the July Forest Service letter, Nobles said the company was repeatedly asked to provide “additional information necessary to assure compliance with BlueTriton’s existing permit” but that the requests were “consistently left unanswered.”

Nobles said that under the regulations, he may consider whether the water used exceeds the “needs of forest resources.”

He also said that while the company had said in its application that the water would go for bottled water, its reports showed that 94% to 98% of the amount of water diverted monthly was delivered to the old hotel property for “undisclosed purposes,”



and that “for months BlueTriton has indicated it has bottled none of the water taken,” while also significantly increasing the volumes extracted.

“This increase represents significantly more water than has ever been delivered previously,” Nobles wrote. “The hotel and conference facility on the property is not operating, and there is no explanation of where the millions of gallons of water per month are going.”

He said the decision is final and cannot be appealed.

Nobles ordered the company to “stop use of the BlueTriton pipeline” within seven days “by severing or blocking the pipe at each tunnel or borehole” at a dozen sites; to remove the locks on its equipment; and to submit a plan within three months for removing all of its infrastructure.

Forest Service officials did not respond to an email requesting comments about the decision.

BlueTriton’s spokesperson said the Forest Service has agreed to a “temporary 30-day stay for the sole purpose of supplying the needs of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, including for fire prevention.”

“We will continue to operate in compliance with all state and federal laws while we explore legal and regulatory options,” the spokesperson said.

The company says in the lawsuit that the Forest Service has violated federal law with a decision that is “arbitrary and capricious.”

BlueTriton said studies by its scientific consultants have found that the taking of water “has not negatively affected the Strawberry Canyon environment.”

Records show about 319 acre-feet, or 104 million gallons, flowed through the company's pipes in 2023.

In the rugged canyon downhill from the springs, Strawberry Creek has continued flowing in recent years. But when Frye has [hiked along the creek](#), she has found that its western fork, located downhill from the boreholes, is just a trickle, forming a series of puddles among the bushes and trees.

“Our goal was to get that water back in the creek and protect the forest,” Frye said. “The proof will be when the pipes and all that infrastructure is taken out and it's restored. But I think we're nearing the end.”

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Ian James is a reporter who focuses on water in California and the West. Before joining the Los Angeles Times in 2021, he was an environment reporter at the

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