

Protecting Our Wells and Groundwater in Elko New Market

By Janelle Kuznia 12/30/2025

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Janelle Kuznia in front of the Niagara Bottling water plant in Elko New Market. Photo by Sarah Whiting

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Every drop of groundwater matters, especially when the water is shared by thousands of private well owners and drawn on heavily by a single industrial user. I live in New Market Township and am now, unexpectedly, a water advocate.

Increased pumping by the city of Elko New Market in city wells impacted private wells of nearby township residents and a few city residents using a private well. These well owners are seeing the consequences: black and brown water, ruined filtration systems, and long delays in responses from city officials after a municipal pump test harmed private wells.

This isn't an isolated problem; it is a warning sign for communities across Minnesota as large water users like bottling plants and data centers compete for the same precious resource.

In 2022, California-based Niagara Bottling selected Elko New Market as the site for its new Midwest facility. Negotiations with the city happened largely behind closed doors under the cryptic

code name Project Horseshoe. Before most residents knew about it, the company had secured conditional use permits, reduced water rates, and promises of millions in subsidies.

By the time news broke publicly, the preliminary plot of land request and conditional use permits were already heading toward approval. Township residents were effectively shut out of decisions that directly affected their wells, their water, and their future. Residents organized quickly, connected with local nonprofits, held rallies, attended city council meetings, and contacted local and state officials.

Residents filed a petition with the state of Minnesota's Environmental Quality Board (EQB) citing concerns about our private wells and local surface water, as well as trout streams and calcareous fens. Residents collected hundreds of signatures demanding an Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW), but the state denied our petition, deferring the issue to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The DNR denied our petition and promised to address it during the water appropriation permit process.

Over the next year, we kept pushing. Finally, in response, the DNR required the city to run a multi-aquifer pump test in late 2023. During the four-week test, the city pumped 1.8 million gallons a day out of the ground. Soon after, dozens of private well owners began reporting problems with black, sooty water, foul odors, ruined filtration systems, and damaged appliances. Sixty-eight homeowners filed complaints with the city, the DNR, and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).

Despite these issues, in June 2024 the DNR issued Elko New Market's water appropriation permit, making the city responsible for investigating and addressing well interference and water contamination.

At a public meeting in September 2025, city officials admitted their excess pumping had likely caused quality problems in private wells. Their theory: the extended drawdown of the aquifer from the pump test drew down our private wells, and newly exposed contaminants — already present in our wells — were released into the water column, captured by our pumps, and delivered to our homes.

The solution offered: allow well owners who filed a complaint to receive a one-time compensation of \$300 in exchange for release of liability, or allow well owners who had expenses greater than \$300 to appeal to the city in hopes of being fully compensated for their expenses. The third option: deny the first two options and reserve the right to legal action.

The city told homeowners in an October meeting that when we see black chunks or brown water, we should run our outside hoses for 30 minutes to flush our wells before using inside water. The city did not clarify how this would be done in the winter.

As local well owners explore legal options, Niagara is not working to solve the problems. They have been in operation of Phase 1 since summer 2025, with the right to use 165 million gallons of water per year, or 45 percent of the city's total permitted allocation. They are positioning for Phase II, which would double that.

Minnesota Statute 103G.261 states that the first priority for water allocation is domestic supply. Yet industrial bottling facilities, and increasingly data centers, are able to “piggyback” on municipal permits rather than seek their own. The result: residents’ wells are at risk, while corporate users face few consequences.

Niagara Bottling operates under the city’s municipal water permit, not its own. To many of us who rely on private wells, this feels like a loophole that undermines Minnesota’s statutory water allocation priorities. The DNR and MDH attached quality provisions to a municipal permit, but enforcement remains with the city whose pumping caused the damage.

When nearly half of a city’s water permit is allocated to one industrial user, the public interest is not protected.

Community volunteers have stepped in where the government has fallen short. Together with the Minnesota Well Owners Organization (MNWOO), we have held two well-testing clinics, filed data requests, and advocated with legislators for reform. We have proposed that any industrial user drawing more than a set threshold should obtain their own DNR water appropriation permit. This ensures monitoring, accountability, and the ability to suspend use if private wells are affected. Minnesota needs a new approach — one that prioritizes regional water planning, transparency, and the rights of private well owners. We must:

- Require industrial users to obtain their own water permits.
- Establish protections for well owners and fund well testing, education, and mitigation.
- Conduct Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) for all high-water-use projects, testing both quantity and quality before they begin.
- Mandate regional planning for all water appropriation permits, as 83 metro municipalities and 1.2 million private well owners in the state rely on this water.
- Ensure early, meaningful public involvement in groundwater decisions.

Groundwater belongs to the people of Minnesota. If we fail to protect it, we risk leaving families without safe drinking water and turning local aquifers into corporate assets. It’s time we acted to restore accountability, sustainability, and trust.

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