



The Public Eye Greenwash Award 2010 for the most questionable eco-social label goes to:

CEO WATER MANDATE

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Good evening and thank you to the Public Eye Awards for selecting the United Nations CEO Water Mandate for its first Greenwash award. I commend the Public Eye Awards for creating this important new category. This award will shine a spotlight on how companies and the United Nations greenwash the dirty images of offensive corporations so that profits can keep flowing.

For the first award, the selection committee has chosen an initiative that is ostensibly designed to help the planet and all of its natural inhabitants to cope with one of the most alarming and critical issues of our times: the global water crisis. We have all seen the trendlines of this profound environmental catastrophe – the drying up of aquifers, rivers and lakes at an alarming rate, due to overexploitation; the pollution and contamination of fresh water systems and watersheds; and the resulting threat to or disappearance of access to clean water for billions of humans on the planet.

Meanwhile, the supply of the earth's water is dwindling while demand is growing. Some water scientists predict that demand will out-pace supply by as much as 56 percent in 2025. In addition, the fact that the price of water now outstrips the price of oil virtually ensures that there will be increasing fights around the world over who has control of supply. Of utmost importance for the mitigation of this crisis is proper control and management of what water we have left. Governments must keep the supply public and out of the hands of those that would privatize and commodify water for the purpose of making profit.

Moreover, corporations that use water as a primary input are now desperate to control and exploit the remaining supply. These are companies representing such diverse industries as steel, aluminum, textile, mining, forestry, oil, chemical, food and beverage and environmental utilities – all of which rely on water as a basic ingredient for their production. At the same time, these water-dependent companies do not want the public to know what role they have played in contributing to the global water crisis in the first place.

For such water using companies, accomplishing these goals is made easier through initiatives like The CEO Water Mandate. Established under the auspices of the United Nations' Global Compact, the CEO Water Mandate is a voluntary, non-binding, public-private partnership. Under the guise of environmental stewardship, the CEO Water Mandate provides these companies with a platform, sanctioned by the United Nations, to directly influence governments and shape public water policy in order to secure access to water supplies essential to their profit-making enterprises.

The Mandate allows endorsers - including such well documented abusers as Suez, Nestlé, Coca Cola, PepsiCo, Dow Chemical, Shell and De Beers - to use the blue flag of the United Nations to cover up their damaging operations and ugly track records.

Guiding endorsers on how to dominate water governance structures where they have operations, the Mandate teaches water companies to work closely with all levels of government, civil society and international institutions to either increase influence or to take the lead in designing legislation that will secure access to water resources. In doing so, the Mandate serves to protect the companies' access to water as a commodity for profit.

The Mandate claims legitimacy because it is a self-styled multi-stakeholder initiative where companies commit to working with UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other non-business stakeholders to address the water crisis. By endorsing the CEO Water Mandate companies' can easily state that they are working with all of these actors in order to appear involved with solving problems of water scarcity, pollution and overexploitation, while their damaging production processes can continue unchecked. In effect, the Mandate is used by companies to make people forget that they overexploit water sources.

So, let's take a brief look at a snapshot of greenwashing by two major corporate players in the CEO Water Mandate endorsers:

First Coca Cola:

What Coke says they are doing: In 2007 the company pledged to replace 'every drop' of water it uses for production by the end 2010. What they do in reality: in 2008, Coke's own figures show that it used 313 billion litres (almost 860 million litres a day) to produce its drinks. In late 2009 Coke said it was aiming to double annual sales generated by it and its bottling system by 2020. This move will dramatically increase the amount of water the company uses, and based on where the company is looking to expand its production - China, Brazil, Mexico, India, Vietnam - most of this water will come from countries in the Global South.

Second De Beers:

What de Beers says they are doing: In the company's 2008 environment report, De Beers Managing Director, Gareth Penny said that "The diamond is an extraordinary product of nature and as such is a constant reminder of our collective duty of care for the natural world." What De Beers does in reality: De Beers' own figures show that the company uses 105 million litres a day for its operations. The majority of its freshwater usage occurs in semi-arid or arid water-scarce regions in southern Africa. Both of these companies prominently feature the CEO Water Mandate in their environmental reports.

Not only does the Global Compact and the CEO Water Mandate facilitate more corporate control of water, it makes the United Nations an apologist and enabler of corporate greenwashing. The United Nations has no business greenwashing or facilitating corporate water grabs. Instead, the UN should return to the mandate they abandoned some 35 years ago, namely, effectively regulating the operations of transnational corporations around the world. The Polaris Institute is committed to pursuing this agenda.