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Thirst (Docu)

A Snitow-Kaufman Prods. presentation.
Produced, directed by Alan Snitow, Deborah Kaufman.

By DENNIS HARVEY

Water is life, but the livin' ain't easy in "Thirst," Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman's docu about the life-giving liquid that can no longer be taken for granted. Emerging issue -- unthinkable not long ago -- is whether water access reps "part of the global commons" everyone should have free access to, or is an economic commodity to be bought and sold. Viewers unaware of that debate will suffer a rude awakening via this sturdy overview. Short feature preems June 18 at San Francisco's Roxie Cinema on the heels of fest appearances; in mid-July it airs on PBS nonfiction showcase "P.O.V."

As in so many other areas of society, privatization is creeping into the hitherto strictly government-regulated terrain of water processing, delivery and infrastructure. Enormous estimated costs to replace outdated plants and pipes has made corporate contracts attractive to some. Growing concerns like German-led Thames Water Co. claim they can do the job more efficiently and cheaper than longstanding public works departments.

But is it wise to surrender control over so essential a resource to private, profit-driven entities? How can we be sure they have in mind (and will maintain) our best interests? The filmmakers travel to Bolivia and India, where such recent shifts have caused strife. When U.S. firm Bechtel acquired water rights to former nation's third largest city, rates jumped as much as 300%, prompting riots, police violence and at last government retrenchment.

Indian region Rajasthan is at the forefront of local community efforts to maintain water self-reliance, despite the national drive toward dependence on privately held dams and reservoirs. The day is not far away, poor residents fear, when it may become illegal to collect even their own rainwater.

Stockton, Calif., proves a Stateside focal point for similar arguments. Mayor and City Council try -- and eventually succeed in -- replacing a reputedly excellent local water department with foreign biz Thames. They manage this without public vote, despite community outrage. Pic strongly suggests this scenario as the start of a likely trend, unless residents begin digging in their heels.

An unsexy issue, water is -- as one observer here puts it -- hard for people to rally around until the day it's no longer there. That they'd better not wait so long is underlined by one World Bank spokesman's confident assertion that free access to water in the near future is no more than a "fantasy."

As in their prior docus "Blacks & Jews" and "Secrets of Silicon Valley," co-helmets present a cogent bottom-to-top take on complexly related racial, economic, legislative and individual issues. Corporate heads are given ample face time, though clear sympathy here lies with activists jousting against the money-and-policy behemoths. Tech aspects are smoothly handled.

Camera (color, DV), Vicente Franco, Marsha Kahm, Avijit Mukul Kishore; editor, Kenji Yamamoto; music, Fred Frith; sound, John Bowler, Claudia Katayanagi, Girjashankar Vohra. Reviewed on videocassette, San Francisco, June 3, 2004. Running time: 62 MIN.