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Golf Courses Urged to Help Save Lake Merced

By Peter Tira

San Francisco and Peninsula golf courses may have to change their ways and start irrigating their greens with recycled water to help save Lake Merced.

San Francisco officials and the public have already met twice with representatives of the four golf courses pumping

from the underground spring that feeds the lake. Two more meetings are scheduled, including one with state Senator Quentin Kopp (I-San Francisco), in order to bring about long-term solutions to Lake Merced's water crisis.

"This water belongs to the public, and I am not happy with what they're doing," said Jer-

Use of recycled water may be necessary

emy West of the Committee to Save Lake Merced. "[The golf courses] are simply going to have to recognize the days of free water are coming to an end."

West's remarks were made at a recent meeting held to find

solutions to save the lake. Public officials said the golf courses were reluctant to switch to recycled water.

"They're not real excited about it," said John Mullane, general manager of San Francisco's water department.

Current pumping effort

This week, the water department is expected to conclude its pumping of city drinking water into Lake Merced since the lake level is approaching the targeted 2-foot increase.

The daily pumping of 5

million gallons of water into the lake began April 7. Two more feet will be added in July at the end of the nesting season for Lake Merced's bird populations.

Both city officials and lake users have considered the pumping a quick-fix solution to a complex problem. They say that better management of

the underground aquifer that feeds the lake is the only solution to reversing Lake Merced's shrinking water levels.

In addition to four golf courses, a host of Colma cemeteries and three cities pump from the aquifer underneath Lake Merced, drawing more water out than what is being

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replaced naturally.

Water officials from San Francisco and Daly City, however, say they've made progress with the three cities using the aquifer — Daly City, San Bruno, and South San Francisco. The cities have expressed support for purchasing their water from San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy system in the Sierra in years when there is excess water to sell.

But the golf courses, say these officials, have been less receptive to using recycled water on their greens and fairways, even though three of them — the Olympic Club, Lake Merced, and the San Francisco Golf Club — could tap into a supply immediately.

"Here it is 24 years after the original Earth Day and we're still using water once and then throwing it away," said Michael Abramson, director of

the Department of Water and Wastewater Resources for Daly City.

"If the golf courses did not pull water out, there would not be an overdraft of the aquifer," he said. "I could deliver water to the three golf courses today."

Abramson said that, if the golf courses were to quit pumping from the aquifer, Lake Merced's levels would not be diminishing. If the cemeteries and golf courses, which to-

gether pump about 1 billion gallons of water a year from the aquifer, began using recycled water, Lake Merced's water level would rise by 3 feet.

Although San Francisco is in the infant stages of developing a recycled-water program, Daly City has a treatment system and a supply of recycled water available for sale.

In 1971, San Francisco and Peninsula golf courses considered purchasing recycled water from Daly City.

By 1978, Daly City had awarded contracts for installing the piping that

would deliver water to the golf courses, and by 1980 construction was completed.

But the San Francisco Department of Public Health thwarted the plan, expressing concern over possible health risks.

Today, golf courses throughout the state use recycled water. And the health department now has no problems with local golf courses using the Daly City supply.

Before the Lake Merced crisis, discussion about the golf courses switching to reclaimed water waxed

and waned, usually in proportion to the severity of the California drought.

"I don't think the golf courses are the problem," said Joseph Stretch, president of the Olympic Club.

Stretch said the reclaimed water available from Daly City could harm the 70-year-old golf course.

"Reclaimed water has a lot of heavy metals that kill the grass on the old courses," he said.

Stretch said discussions were far too preliminary to enable an assessment of what it would cost the club to

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convert to reclaimed water. Presently, the courses use the water they pump from the aquifer free of charge and pay only for the electricity necessary for the pumping.

Concern over water quality

One of the major reservations of the golf courses is the quality of Daly City's water, which is called "secondary effluent."

Secondary effluent is one notch below the purest level of recycled water. The golf courses said they would be more willing to use "tertiary effluent," which has less restrictions on its use.

Daly City, however, doesn't have the facilities to treat the water to the tertiary level.

"The bottom line is it does work," said Abramson of Daly City's reclaimed water supply. Abramson said he knew of at least 28 golf courses throughout the state that used secondary effluent.

He added that using recycled water would force the golf courses to change their current irrigation practices, regardless of the type of recycled water.

They would have to irrigate the land at night, post signs stating their use of recycled water, and separate the plumbing system for drinking water from that used for irrigation.

But Joshua Milstein, deputy city attorney, said that water officials and the golf courses could not discuss the issue forever.

"If we don't get our act together

and start managing the basin, and that includes Lake Merced, we could start to see salt water encroachment," he said.

Not only could that ruin the potable drinking supply and turn Lake Merced into a saltwater marsh, it could result in intervention by the state Water Resources Control Board.

A similar scenario has already occurred in Salinas, where heavy agricultural pumping led to the destruction of an aquifer and intervention by the state water board, which imposed a management plan on the local area.

"The threat is out there, and it's in nobody's interest to have an outside agency come in and tell us how to manage our water," Milstein said.

Under state law, the golf courses and cemeteries in Colma could be forced to start using recycled water, should Daly City choose to force their hand.

The state constitution considers the wasting of water to be illegal. Through the years that has been defined to include using potable water to irrigate golf courses and cemeteries when there is a supply of recycled

water. Daly City could technically go before the state water board and attempt to force the courses to buy its water.

Local officials, however, are hoping for a more cooperative resolution to Lake Merced's water crisis.

"Switching to reclaimed water is a huge decision," said Supervisor Annemarie Conroy, who has led the Board of Supervisors' efforts to resolve the Lake Merced crisis. "At least they're talking and coming to the table. They don't have to do that."