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Lake Merced water disappearing

Aquifer levels low, lake in disrepair

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SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT

This isn't a magic act - Lake Merced is really disappearing.

According to the Lake Merced Task Force, the lake is at half of its normal volume, despite several years of record-breaking rainfall. The group claims that if action isn't taken soon, Lake Merced will become the Merced Mudflats, and a valuable water resource will be lost forever.

Together with California Trout, a group dedicated to protecting California's waterways and the residing fish, the Lake Merced Task Force filed a petition January 30 with the California State Water Resources Control Board, five other state agencies and both San Francisco and San Mateo counties, urging the agencies to act to protect Lake Merced and the underground water source that provides crucial water for parks, cemeteries, and golf courses.

"Lake Merced is the proverbial 'canary in the coal mine' for the Westside Basin Aquifer," said Dick Morten of San Francisco's Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR). "It is the surface manifestation of the aquifer and reflects its overall health."

An aquifer is sometimes considered to be nature's underground holding tank for groundwater. The Westside Basin runs from under Golden Gate Park to the San Francisco airport. Because it resides under both San Francisco and San Mateo counties, both counties have legal rights to use of the water, making it difficult for any one agency to take the lead in management.

Area residents are frustrated with the slow action on the part of local and state agencies that have been aware of the lake's water level dropping since 1988.

"Frankly, we are surprised that the group took this legal action," said Beverly Hennessey, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission spokesperson, the



PHOTO: RORY MCNAMARA

Ralph Hunter, who visits the lake several times a year to look for wildlife, stands at what was once the entrance to the childrens' pier.

city agency responsible for handling the city's water supplies. "Our planning director has been attending all their meetings. We thought we were making headway, but we might not be moving as fast as some people want us to."

California Trout (CalTrout), formed in 1971, is best known for the lawsuit to restore Mono Lake in Los Angeles County. The group's lawsuits, known in legal circles as Cal Trout1 and Cal Trout2, helped set major precedents that the Lake Merced Task Force hopes will be instrumental to restoring Lake Merced.

"We filed a petition instead of a lawsuit," said Richard Roos-Collins, attorney for CalTrout. Roos-Collins worked on the Mono Lake cases. "Because of the nature of court cases, Mono Lake took 26 years to settle. We hope the petition route will encourage an expedited settlement."

"This used to be one of the top

urban places to fish in the country," said Mark Bergstrom, executive director of CalTrout, "a standard by which all other urban fishing programs were judged."

According to CalTrout, there isn't enough water, particularly cold water, to maintain the wildlife and fish. Due to rising water temperatures, oxygen levels have dropped, making it difficult to sustain any fish populations in the lake. Diehard fishermen like Karl Burke, who has fished in Lake Merced every Saturday with his friends for over 20 years, used to talk about the great fish they caught. Now they talk about the reasons why the fishing is so bad.

Weeds, in excess of twelve feet tall, choke fishing banks that were once outlined with well-maintained walkways and piers. The 'handicap pier,' which once jutted far enough over the water so a person in a wheelchair could

easily cast a line to a desirable fishing hole, now sits atop dust. Boat hoists that once set afloat sailboats, windsurfers and canoes dangle above dry banks.

A sign on one side of the lake where San Francisco State ran an active rowing program through the 1980s now reads, "Launch boat at own risk due to water quality conditions."

Lake Merced, in addition to being an important recreational facility, it is also considered to be an emergency water supply source for San Francisco. Once with reserves enough to supply San Francisco with drinking water for ten days, now the volume is technically enough to supply four days of water. But the water has become so murky, it is doubtful anyone would drink from it.

Currently, five golf courses, Golden Gate Park, the San

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Francisco Zoo, San Francisco State University and all the cemeteries in Daly City are irrigated with fresh underground drinking water pumped from the Westside Basin aquifer. As the aquifer levels drop from pumping, Lake Merced, which is fed from the aquifer, drops as well.

"It's unfathomable that San Francisco, ground zero for environmental consciousness, does not use recycled water anywhere in the city," said Mark Bergstrom, California Trout's executive director. "I'm sure Los Angeles would laugh at that."

Currently, reclaimed water is being used in all surrounding Northern California counties, except for San Mateo. Beverly Hennessey, spokesperson for San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, the agency in charge of water for San Francisco, said it is true that San Francisco does not have a recycled water program in place at this time.

"It is a rather expensive undertaking to create a recycled water program," Hennessey said. "We need to find a way to make the water affordable to users."

"Obviously, right now it's cheaper to pump," said Tim Colen, co-chairperson of the water issue committee of the Lake Merced Task Force that examined the environmental impacts of the lake's dropping water levels. "But cost should not be the deciding factor. We need to look at this from a wider perspective."

The water levels at the lake are currently at levels of 17 to 18



PHOTO: RORY MCNAMARA

The wheelchair ramp to the fishing pier and the beach is enjoyed by visitors.

feet, down from the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission mandated levels of 25 to 27 feet, set forth in a SFPUC resolution made in 1950. At present levels, the lake is dropping more than six inches a year. As water levels drop, the rate at which the lake is lowering could become accelerated.

According to state and local engineering reports, water is being pumped out of Lake Merced faster than rainwater

can replenish the supply. Naturally, the fresh water underground flows from the center of the aquifer towards the ocean and bay. However, since the rate of pumping has increased dramatically in the last 20 years, there is scientific evidence to show that the natural flow may be reversing, and salt water may start to flow into the aquifer, instead of away.

If salt water intrusion happens, the aquifer will be unusable to

everyone, so there is a vested interest in all parties, including the state and local regulatory agencies to work together with the golf courses and cemeteries to find alternate solutions.

"This is an issue that has been ignored for far too long," said Colen. "We know this will be a long fight. I just hope the public will hear about this and become outraged enough to move the politicians to do something before it's too late."