

Lake Merced's Troubled Waters

Action taken to stop overpumping at lake

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Because of low water at Lake Merced in San Francisco, the Kids Fishing Pier is marooned on shore like a shipwreck. The pier sits on an exposed bank above water, sloped down at a 45-degree angle, one end smothered in tules, a chain-link fence walling off its entrance, while a broken-down "Closed" sign lies face-up on the walkway.

According to an action that was filed with the State Water Resources Control Board, that pier is a symbol of an environmental disaster at Merced that has been caused by over-pumping groundwater from beneath the lake, in effect draining it.

The action is being taken by California Trout, Inc., a statewide trout and conservation organization headquartered in San Francisco. It filed what is technically termed "an administrative petition" at the State Water Board. The petition also was simultaneously filed with the City and County of San Francisco, including the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, San Mateo County and five other state agencies: California Coastal Commission, San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, Department of Fish and Game, Department of Water Resources and State Lands Commission.

CalTrout named 26 respondents in the complaint, primarily Daly City, golf courses and cemeteries, all of which pump groundwater from the aquifer beneath the lake, which is known as the Westside Basin Aquifer. About 60 percent of the water taken is being pumped by Daly City and three golf courses, according to Mark Bergstrom, executive director of CalTrout.

The lake level now stands at 9.25 feet above mean sea level, or 18 feet at the South Lake gauge.

CalTrout is asking that the level be restored and maintained to at least 18.25 feet above mean sea level, or 25 to 27 feet at the South Lake gauge.

In its master plan for the lake, the San Francisco Water Department also calls for a lake level of 26 feet at the South Lake Gauge. That would provide a 10-day

emergency supply of water for San Francisco. Current levels would provide only a four-day supply.

Michael Carlin, the planning director for the San Francisco PUC, said that a target level of 24 to 26 feet at the South Lake Gauge would be ideal, and that the PUC passed a resolution for that two years ago.

But further studies would be needed to accomplish that, he said.

"We want to take an integrated approach rather than a single solution," Carlin said. "We'll have a pilot

project in place next winter to restore the watershed, redirecting storm-water flow, to bring that into the lake. We'll be full scale the year after that, so we're looking at two years.

"We're also working with Daly City and the golf courses to use recycled water (for irrigation), to reduce pumping of groundwater."

These two proposals, to increase storm runoff into the lake and to substitute recycled water for groundwater pumping, could take years to bring the lake level up, all parties acknowledge.

Bob Maddow, attorney for three golf courses, Olympic Club, San Francisco Golf Club and Lake Merced Golf and Country Club, agreed with Carlin's assessment that there is no single, fast solution.

"I realize there is a lot of impatience out there, but everybody is proceeding in good faith to resolve the very difficult issues that exist," Maddow said.

He said blaming the golf courses for the low lake levels in the past 10 years is a mistake.

"The golf courses have been pumping irrigation water for many decades," Maddow said. "The amount of water (they take), if anything, has gone down because they are trying to be more efficient."

The lake level is so low that boat ramps are above water, boat hoists do not reach the lake, fishing piers extend over dry land, tules have filled in 10 to 20 feet along the shore to block access, and at times, dissolved oxygen levels in the lake do not support fish life.

"This was once one of the finest urban fisheries in the United States," Bergstrom said. "Now there is risk that Lake Merced will become a mudflat choked with tules."

He compared the Lake Merced situation to Mono Lake, where CalTrout won a case that required flows to be returned to the lake that had been diverted for 50 years by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

Bergstrom said his organization is tired of "the delays, more studies, broken promises, degradation of the public trust water quality and quantity.

"Their job is to protect the public trust, and they just don't get it," Bergstrom said.

He said the best way to accomplish that is to place limitations on pumping, begin use of reclaimed waters as proposed, and manage the groundwater supply conjunctively with surface water supply.

Lake Merced is located on the coast near the San Francisco Zoo, set within 20 miles of 3.5 million people and is the only public lake with fishing from San Francisco on south for 45 miles to Stevens Creek Reservoir near Cupertino.

Until recent years, it has provided vital recreation needs, including sailboating, sculling and fishing. In the mid-1980s, Lake Merced was called "the crown jewel of urban fishing programs" by Field & Stream magazine, attracting up to 2,000 anglers per day. An earlier study by the Department of Fish and Game named Merced "the richest trout lake in California," primarily because of prolific numbers of freshwater shrimp, which provided forage for fish and aquatic birds.

In the past 15 years, the lake has dropped half of its volume, now with 2,900 acre feet of water, compared with 5,300 feet, its historic volume.

At the Merced Impoundment, where a children's fishing program was once popular, dissolved oxygen counts are so low that fish life cannot be supported,

according to the DFG, and all trout plants have been suspended at the Impoundment for several years.

At the South Lake, water levels are so low that rowboats must be hand-carried to the lake and then can hit bottom 50 feet from shore. Survival of trout is precarious at best, according to the Mt. Lassen Trout Hatchery, which monitors the lake. In the North Lake, low water has caused high algae counts, which contribute to foul tasting fish, according to the action.

According to a study by the U.S. Geologic Survey, the "probable cause" for the long-term decline in the lake level is from groundwater pumping beneath the lake. The San Francisco PUC agreed with this finding.

✓ At the source of the conflict are high-powered wells located near the Impoundment that take water from the Merced aquifer and deliver it to Daly City, the Olympic Golf Club and other users. Even if water is pumped into Merced from nearby Crystal Springs Reservoir to raise the lake level, as occurred for two days last year, that water can then be sucked from the lake by the pumps in the aquifer.

✓ The wells at Merced supply about two dozen users. They are divided in three groups: Urban Water Suppliers (Daly City, City of San Bruno, California Water Service Company), golf courses and parks (Olympic Club, Lake Merced Golf & Country Club, Cypress Hills, San Francisco Golf & Country Club, Golden Gate Park and San Francisco Zoo), and cemeteries (Cypress Lawn Memorial, Eternal Home, Golden Hills and 13 others).

In 1999, the Bay Area's top recreation concessionaire, Urban Parks, pulled the plug on its operations at Merced over the issue.

"I have seen 15 years of talk, meetings and studies with very little being done," said Chris Senti of Urban Parks, who specifically blamed low lake levels and lack of response by the City of San Francisco for the degraded conditions at the lake.

The San Francisco Recreation and Park Department has undertaken a \$560,000 restoration operation at Merced, but it has done nothing to restore water to historic lake levels.

Jerry Cadagan of the Committee to Save Lake Merced, a grassroots group that is helping CalTrout with its efforts to restore the San Francisco lake, said he was stunned to discover there are no limits on groundwater pumping.

"They are basically taking all the water they can get with those pumps," Cadagan said. "I'm disappointed that something like this has to go to legal proceedings, but I'm happy that we will make serious progress in making that lake well. Our kids will get the benefit of this."

California Trout became known across America for its victory in the Mono Lake suit, known in legal circles as CalTrout I and CalTrout II.