

Rare frog, snake at center of golf dispute

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An environmental group is accusing the city of San Francisco of illegally killing two federally protected animals that live at a publicly owned golf course, and is threatening to sue if city officials refuse to close the golf course and restore the coastal wetlands.

The potential legal challenge over Sharp Park Golf Course - a city-owned, beachside course built around a lagoon in Pacifica - is the latest salvo in a continuing battle over the future of the city's five public courses. The announcement was made just days before a public meeting on the issue.

The Center for Biological Diversity plans to file a claim today in an attempt to protect the endangered San Francisco garter snake and the threatened red-legged frog, which are native to the area. The claim accuses the Recreation and Park Department, which owns the 77-year-old golf course, of killing both animals through regular maintenance activities, including lawn mowing, the use of chemicals, the draining of water from the area and alteration of the habitat in other ways.

Neither a spokesman for the department or the city attorney's office responded to requests seeking comment. But several golfers said the city and golfers have worked hard to coexist with the creatures.

The course is situated just north of Mori Point, a 110-acre stretch of headlands where the National Park Service is working to save both species. The links were designed by famed architect Alister MacKenzie and landscaped by John McLaren, although some of the holes were moved east over the years as the city grappled with flooding from the adjacent lagoon and ocean.

The timing of the legal claim is tied to a continuing debate over the future of the city's golf courses, said Brent Plater, a conservationist who is working with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Plater is also a member of a city task force formed to study the courses and whether any should be closed, leased out to private operators or changed in any other way. The task force will meet Monday to discuss a controversial report from a city-paid consultant who recommended leasing out all of the courses, and restoring Sharp Park to its original design.

"As far as we know this is the last opportunity to shape public opinion before the Rec and Park Department goes behind the scenes to cook up some plan," Plater said. "The absurdity of (the consultant's recommendations) indicate there's a disconnect between the realities on the ground and the vision some people must have for that site."

The city got in trouble three years ago for pumping water off of the golf course during winter flooding, a move that left frog eggs and tadpoles out to dry. Now, environmentalists say they have proof that frog eggs and tadpoles again were killed this year and that the garter snake is continually being harmed by maintenance activity, including being run over by lawnmowers when it attempts to sun itself.

The snake, which has striking bright markings, was one of the first species to be designated as federally endangered. Its fate is linked to the threatened frog, one of the snakes' main food sources.

Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the environmental group, said they view Sharp Park as one of the region's great restoration opportunities. He and Plater argue that the continuing drainage problems at the course cost the city tens of thousands of dollars a year, and that those issues are only going to get worse as sea levels rise. Miller also said that the closure of the course would allow for numerous recreational opportunities.

But Rich Harris, another task force member who represents the San Francisco Public Golf Alliance, insisted that golf courses can coexist with protected animals. He pointed to the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary program for golf, which helps courses to protect the environment.

Another task force member, Dave Diller, said the city and golfers have worked hard over the years to protect the environment. Diller noted that the county of San Mateo and city of Pacifica have passed resolutions in support of keeping the golf course.

Harris said the closure of Sharp Park would be a huge loss for golfers, because of its location and fame as a Mackenzie-designed course. And the green fees there never exceed \$38 - a bargain compared to Harding Park course near Lake Merced where fees can be as high as \$155 on weekends.

"Everyone started going there after Harding prices shot up. It's very heavily used," he said. "The thing that makes Sharp Park unique is it's a (public course) and it has a low green fee, so Joe Six-Pack can play."

Get involved

Attend the Golf Task Force meeting to weigh in on the city's golf courses. It will take place at 6 p.m. Monday at San Francisco City Hall, Room 278.