

## Millions in turf rebates slated for golf courses already using reclaimed water

By Mike Reicher , Los Angeles Daily News



Golfers in carts drive along a fairway at Oakmont Country Club. Amid the drought, some Southern California golf courses signed up for multi-million dollar turf replacement rebates, with plans to rip out decorative grass. Oakmont Country Club in Glendale, for example, received \$2.3 million. Glendale, CA 8/11/2015 (photo by John McCoy Daily News)

Amid the drought, some Southern California golf courses signed up for multi-million dollar turf replacement rebates, with plans to rip out decorative grass. Oakmont Country Club in Glendale, for example, received \$2.3 million. Glendale, CA 8/11/2015 (photo by John McCoy Daily News)

Oakmont Country Club's \$2.3 million turf removal incentive was the largest the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California paid through mid-June, but it wasn't just its size that was unusual.

Unlike the vast majority of rebate recipients, Oakmont sprays grass with recycled water.



The Glendale club and other private golf courses swept up multimillion-dollar rebates to replace turf despite the fact

they were already irrigating with treated wastewater, one of the most environmentally-friendly sources.

In April, Gov. Jerry Brown specifically targeted potable water with his 25 percent [reduction mandate](#).

Also, the public paid for the “purple pipe” systems that deliver reclaimed water, which is then discounted for the golf course (and other customers). As officials weigh the best use of these two precious resources — water and public funds — some are questioning the wisdom of these large golf subsidies.

“In retrospect, certainly I see it differently,” said Bob Kuhn, president of the Three Valleys Municipal Water District, a member agency of the MWD. “What we’re trying to do is preserve potable water for human beings. If we were to redesign the program tomorrow, I would put a moratorium on (rebates for customers using) recycled water.”

In theory, the recycled water could be used by other customers — parks, schools, street medians — but many water agencies, like Glendale, are not able to reach new customers. Its treatment plant is operating below capacity because the city has [limited funding](#) for new purple pipelines.

“It makes sense in anticipation of that day when there will not be unrestricted access to recycled water,” said Craig Kessler, director of governmental affairs for the Southern California Golf Association. “We’re getting ahead of the curve.”

Some golf courses also mix tap water with recycled water because of higher salt content from reclaimed sources, so turf reduction could help. Oakmont Country Club uses both, said Glendale Water and Power assistant general manager Michael De Ghetto.

A representative from Oakmont did not respond to messages requesting comment.

North Ranch Country Club in Thousand Oaks is another reclaimed-water consumer with a massive turf removal project. Its request for a \$3.2 million MWD rebate drew a lot of [industry attention](#) last winter, while some courses were still learning about the opportunity. Club leaders [told the U.S. Golf Association](#) the planned rebate would cover the cost of the 37-acre grass replacement and in five years could save \$500,000 in water bills.

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Final details of its project have not yet been released by MWD, nor confirmation that it was paid. A representative from North Ranch also didn’t return a call seeking comment.

Clubs like North Ranch and Oakmont already save about 15 percent on their water bills compared with potable water customers, experts say. Savings can be more or less, depending on a local agency’s other water sources. Both courses benefited from multimillion-dollar government pipeline projects in the 1990s.

It’s hard to say how many golf courses fall into this category of recycled users who applied for turf rebates. [Data](#) provided by the MWD show only who has been paid through June 16, not those who applied. These large projects have a more stringent verification process than residential ones, so details are slow in coming. Kessler from the industry association [has pegged](#) the total number of courses that applied for MWD turf rebates, including potable users, at 40. He said roughly a third of the state’s courses are on recycled water.

“It’s certainly one of the loopholes and situations that raise questions,” said Robert Perry, an adjunct professor at the USC School of Architecture who studies conservation. “If this is a private country club, this is a lot of public subsidy for achieving a benefit for a private organization. If this was a public course, this would make more sense to me.”

Golf courses and other large commercial facilities consumed much of the MWD’s \$340 million rebate pool, which is now closed to applicants. In fact, about 60 percent of the rebate cash was pegged for just 5 percent of the applicants during a six-week stretch this spring, according to an MWD presentation. At least three golf projects are pre-approved for more than \$4 million each, MWD spokesman Bob Muir said. It’s unclear if they use recycled water.

While the regional MWD-run program had no restrictions about recycled water, some local water agencies prohibited those users from taking turf rebates, for varying reasons. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, for instance, has excess recycled water supply, said David Pettijohn, DWP director of water resources. At the Irvine Ranch Water District, officials cut off recycled-water applicants when funding dwindled and they needed to focus their resources.

“The state mandate is requiring us to reduce potable water,” Irvine Ranch representative Erika Blaska said, “so offering turf rebates to recycled water customers doesn’t really make sense.”

Another recycled-water course replacing its turf is Sherwood Country Club in Thousand Oaks. It proposed a roughly 7-acre project, according to [one news report](#), which at MWD’s \$2 per square foot cost could gross \$610,000. Representatives there did not return calls. MWD did not confirm the rebate was paid.

“I wish this question had been thought of when that rebate program came to be,” said Kuhn. “That’s what we’re elected to do. For whatever reason, it just wasn’t on the front of our brains.”

For the record

An article in Friday’s edition misidentified Bob Kuhn. He is president of the Three Valleys Municipal Water District, a member agency of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.