

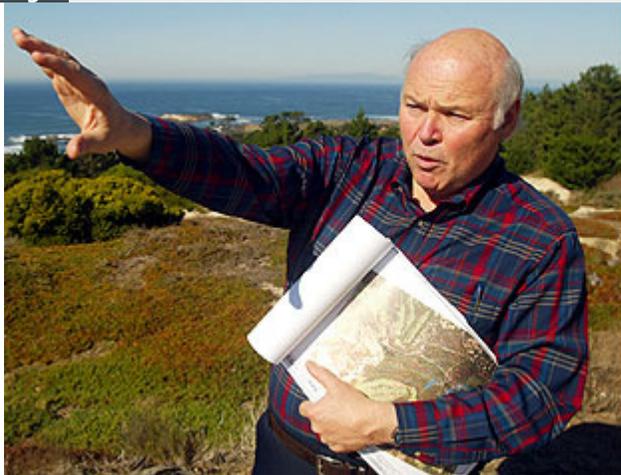


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The methyl bromide brouhaha highlights an issue that environmentalists have been complaining about for years. Golf as it is played in America today, they argue, is an environmental scourge. "Golf is the sleeping giant threatening the environment," declares Mark Massara, director of the Sierra Club's California Coastal Campaign.

That the GCSAA should find itself a potent political force along with big tobacco and big agriculture should surprise no one. Golf is huge. In the last decade, the U.S. has seen an explosion in golf course construction -- from 150 new golf courses per year a decade ago to a peak of 524 new courses in 2000, according to the National Golf Foundation. As of last June, there are 17,816 golf courses in the U.S. -- more than 20 percent of which have been built in the last decade or so.

NGF research also concludes that the nation's 26 million golfers -- more than 12 percent of the population -- spent \$23.5 billion in 2001 on equipment and fees.

These numbers mean clout. The growing golf industry has yet to be fully studied in the same way that, say, health insurance companies are. But -- bearing in mind that many of golf's environmental issues are local land-use ones made at the county and township level -- an analysis of donations to federal candidates by the Center for Responsive Politics indicates that golf and golf-affiliated corporations gave upwards of \$220,000 in the 2001-2002 election cycle, more than two-thirds of which went to Republicans. That rates the golf industry somewhere between gun-control groups and antiabortion ones as a "special interest." Upon hearing of the pending ban, many of the GCSAA's 22,000 members instructed the organization's government affairs department to reach out to the EPA for an exemption. "We know these people," Bollig asserts. "The current administration may be a little bit more receptive to us. Christie Todd Whitman is a fan of golf." The EPA did not return a call for comment. It might seem counterintuitive, at first. After all, these are gorgeous green rolling hills -- expansive fields parenthesized by wooded nooks, studded with ponds and lakes -- some of the most gorgeous spaces known to man. Ah, so one would think. But the truth is that many if not most golf courses are -- as one environmental official once quipped - "about as environmentally friendly as Las Vegas."

Vegas, however, was built atop 84,272 square miles of desert. With golf courses averaging a size of 150 acres apiece, that means about 2.5 million acres -- half the size of Connecticut -- is being devoted to a sport that largely caters to the elite. It'll cost you \$350 to play 18 holes at Pebble Beach, for instance, \$375 with a cart. (Lotta the guys there seem to need the cart, by the way.)

And often these oases for the plaid-panted set are carved from nature the way one might attack a coffeecake -- the result of a ravenous clear-cutting of forests and fields. The 18 million gallons of water it takes on average to keep each one lush for a year can be problematic in times of drought. Endangered species are threatened. And that's the stuff we know about.

Golf courses are often also as unnaturally pumped-up as a steroid-addled East German shot-putter. A 1982 EPA survey reported that the average golf course used about three times the amount of pesticides than even the most pesticide-friendly agribusiness. Those nasty chemicals have a way of making their way into water supplies because the topography isn't real -- the hills and dunes are often constructed out of thin air, sometimes paved over with gravel and then topped with topsoil -- prettier than a parking lot, but not so different in the end.

In the past, chemicals haven't needed to leach into the water supply to become deadly.

In August 1982, after a few rounds of golf at the Army Navy Country Club outside Washington, D.C., Navy Lt. George Prior, an athletic, healthy, 30-year-old Navy flight officer, developed an odd rash on his back and began suffering flu-like symptoms. He checked himself into Bethesda Naval Hospital, where his body soon began to burn from the inside out. His internal organs started failing, blisters bubbled on his skin. After slipping into a coma, he died within days. A Navy forensic pathologist concluded that Prior had died

as a result of a severe allergic reaction to Daconil 2787, a fungicide that had been sprayed on the course. Prior's widow sued Diamond Shamrock, the fungicide's former manufacturer; the case was settled out of court for an undisclosed sum. She soon gave the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides (NCAMP) a rather sizable donation.

While awareness of the potential harms of pesticides has increased dramatically in the last 20 years, Jay Feldman, executive director of the NCAMP, says that their use remains a huge problem on golf courses, which he says are second only to orchard crops in terms of the amount of pesticides they absorb. Feldman remains convinced that even though there are no other known incidents like Prior's, it isn't because they haven't happened, but because Prior -- as a military man on a military course -- was afforded an extra-diligent autopsy. "We're missing a lot of elevated rates of illness and diseases that are associated with pesticide exposure on golf courses," Feldman insists. Studies would show "that other peoples' lives have been cut short as result of exposure to pesticides on golf courses."

That's the challenge for golf's critics -- the lack of concrete data, of concrete facts and figures. Anecdotes abound, of course -- like the four LPGA players diagnosed with breast cancer in 1989. ("We're beginning to wonder," LPGA president Judy Dickinson told USA Today in 1991, "because we've played among these chemicals all these years.") Or the Twilight Zone-esque experience of golf great Billy Casper, who has 51 PGA Tour titles and nine Senior PGA wins. Casper once told Golf Magazine that pesticides at Florida links used to cause him significant health problems, once even causing him to drop out of a Miami-area tournament after 36 holes.

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