BY PETER BLAIS

California golf courses are dealing with a five-year drought that has led to watering restrictions, changes in water rights, charges of unfair allocations, forced conversions to efficient propsals to build multi-billion-dollar seawater desalination plants.

Southern California has been among the hardest hit. Basically a desert area that runs down to the sea, Santa Barbara has been in Phase III restrictions for more than a year, according to LaCumbre Golf & Country Club superintendent Doug Weddle.

For residents that means no washing cars or watering lawns. For golf courses, it means doing with 15 to 20 percent less water than historical allotments, for more than a year, according to LaCumbre Golf & Country Club superintendant Doug Weddle.

"The central and desert areas have been less affected by the dry conditions. "Our chapter hasn't had any major problems, yet," said William Griffith, superintendent at Belmont Country Club in Fresno and president of the GCSCA of Central California.

"Some courses have been asked to cut back on a volunteer basis, but there haven't been any restrictions." Ironically, the Palm Springs area may be the least affected by the drought. "We're sitting on one of the largest underground aquifers in the world," said Ross James O'Fee, superintendent at The Springs Club in Palm Desert and president of the Hi-Lo Desert GCSCA.

LaCumbre received 4-3/4 inches of rain in the last 18 months, onefifth its normal rate. Normally, Weddle could supplement his watering from the course's 33-acre lake. But it has been dry for three years.

"We put a blue line around it just to keep the landscape here," Weddle said.

Santa Barbara superintendent can use their allotments as they see fit. Weddle waters greens and tees as needed. Roughs haven't been watered in 18 months. Fairways get 50 percent less water than it used four years ago.

"I think we're living in the past," Weddle said. "The situation has been much worse in the past."

To minimize growth, Santa Barbara never receives more water than it needs.have been watered in 18 months. Fairways get 50 percent of their needs. That has left some fairways thinner, browner and with more weeds than he would like, but has freed some of the precious liquid for the many trees that line the course.

"We don't have a problem," Weddle said. "If a tree dies, you may never see one on that spot again in your lifetime. But you can always replace grass," Weddle reasoned.

Wells were pumped so low this summer that salt water invaded parts of the Santa Barbara aquifer. That led to summer patch on six LaCumbere greens before the new wells were dug, Weddle said.

To minimize growth, Santa Barbara never allocated water to the state water system that draws water from the Colorado River and Northern California. Instead the city tapped the Lake Cachuma watershed. The move maintained a smaller downtown atmosphere, said Raymond Davies, president of the Golf Course Association of Southern California and superintendent at Virginia County Club in Long Beach. But the drought has left Lake Cachuma "virtually dry."

The water problem is so acute local officials are considering building a multi-billion-dollar desalination plant, Weddle said. The facility would require tremendous amounts of energy. A nuclear plant would be the most practical power source, although licensing a new plant in environment-conscious California would seem unlikely. Trucking or shipping water from Alaska is also being considered.

Farther north, Monterey Peninsula courses have rationed water the past 18 months, receiving running 10 degrees above normal. Such conditions historically give rise to El Nino winds bringing moisture from Asia.

"We're hopeful," said Davies, whose course historically averages about 15 inches of annual rainfall. "The last time this happened we got 30 inches."

In Santa Barbara, Weddle would be happy with the area's average 16.4-inch annual rainfall. But it would take more than 30 inches over the next six months before the water districts would consider lifting restrictions, he said.

The drought quickened the conversion to effluent, Davies said. Despite having its own wells, the city required Virginia CC to convert to treated water a year and a half ago. Several older greens, particularly where nitrates and salt pooled, suffered turf damage.

"They (city) basically put a gun to our heads," Davies said. "All six of the city's courses are now on effluent."

A return to normal rainfall may be in sight, according to Davies. Ocean temperatures are running 10 degrees above normal. Such conditions historically give rise to El Nino winds bringing moisture from Asia.

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