By DOUGLAS PAGE

PORTLAND, Ore. — The Environmental Protection Agency rates "nonpoint source" (NPS) pollution as the number-one threat to the nation's water quality. NPS pollutants enter the ground and water table from other than a single point. Golf courses have a NPS pollution reputation because of the suspected run-off of pesticides and fertilizers used to keep the track green and playable.

Recent studies, however, have shown this reputation may itself be suspect. A three-year U.S. Golf Association-funded environmental study by the University of Florida has demonstrated that most organo-phosphate pesticides sprayed on greens are absorbed into the courses' thatch layer — the layer of dead and decaying organic matter at the top of the soil surface and just below the grass.

According to Florida soil scientist George Snyder, "Even less of the pesticide penetrated into the soil and very little seeped into the percolated water." Snyder said the dense root mass of the turfgrass system makes it an ideal "living filter system" for cleansing the water that moves through it.

The thatch layer of the turf holds the pesticides for the soil's microbial organisms to feed on, destroying the toxic organic compounds.

Some course architects have known this all along.

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The changes are saving more than the water table, the club estimates it is saving between $10,000 and $30,000 a year.

Former course superintendent Tom Christie adapted a system used at car washes to fit the club's golf car and mower washing operation. Riverside's mower washing stand, which monitors such variables as water and debris.

We're recycling our wash water. We filter it, we clean it and keep using it over and over, rather than just discharging it somewhere.

"We have to be stewards of the land. We can't just dump any excesses we have, whether water or pesticides.

"It's going to get to the point that it may be required that everybody recycles their wash water. We're just trying to stay ahead of the game and not be a polluter in our environment here."

The wash-water recycling facility (a Water-Maze, manufactured by Landa Corp. in Portland) supplements the overall conservation designed into the course.

Beneath the facility, an extensive drainage system captures naturally cleansed water and returns it to a holding reservoir.