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## THE NATIONAL OBSERVER

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Food & Lifestyle

# Country clubs are flying high. But there's growing pressure to tackle a high-stakes problem.



Image: etincelle999 via Getty Images

As scrutiny over water usage intensifies, golf courses are adopting new strategies to help reduce their consumption.

ETINCELLE999 VIA GETTY IMAGES



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### Story Highlights

- Country clubs across the country are facing increased pressure to rein in their water usage.
- The change comes as fortunes rise for many clubs.
- Numerous techniques and technologies can help cut water usage, experts say.

Woodland Hills Country Club in Los Angeles is using clay to help conserve water across 43 acres of its historic golf course.

The effort, spearheaded by Palo Alto, California-based agri-tech company Desert Control, involves irrigating soil with a special liquid naturally designed to help prevent desertification in dry climate. It can achieve water savings of up to 25% – a big deal for golf courses, which often use tens of millions of gallons of water each year.

Woodland Hills also isn't paying for the services upfront. It will instead pay Desert Control out of monthly savings it achieves from its reduced water bills. The next golf-course client for Desert Control is Berkeley Country Club, also in California.

The surge in golf interest and enthusiasm for country clubs during the Covid-19 pandemic has propelled the industry to new heights. Clubs across the country have raised initiation fees and membership dues while also embarking on renovation and construction projects that many had put off during leaner years after the global financial crisis and subsequent recession in 2009.

"What we are really seeing of late is the value of water, the price of water is such that golf courses are becoming a lot more efficient," said Jason Morris, a land-use attorney at law firm Withey Morris Baug. "Like any business, you try and plan around that for the long term to help your bottom line."

Golf courses and country clubs have worked to become more water efficient for decades, whether by recycling water used onsite or using so-called non-potable "gray water" as much as possible.

But a growing focus on water use in arid areas of the American Southwest and West has put greater scrutiny on country clubs – and those businesses are trying to get ahead of potential government intervention.

"There's public pressure on golf courses that they want to stay ahead of," Morris said. "They want to continue to be a community asset and not a community liability. They don't want to become the Las Vegas Strip, the Bellagio fountains, in a tough time for water."

Country clubs are feeling more pressure now as local governments try to figure out what a world in which water is less abundant, or costs more, looks like. The [Bainbridge Island City Council in Washington state](#) has publicly fretted about the amount of water used by the local Wing Point Golf Course. Water-use restrictions in Southern California have [pushed golf courses to cut water consumption nearly in half](#).

One of Morris' country club clients use about 200 million gallons of water a year but has stacked upgrades and efficiency efforts, whether by installing a

new irrigation system, removing turf in unused areas and reusing water. Savings can quickly add up, but clubs need buy-in from their members to make it happen, he added.

Solutions can vary widely, whether it's using [native vegetation in areas that make sense](#) or keeping the greens vibrant with a new strain of water-efficient turf grass. His client is ripping up acres of greens in favor of a grass that has been bred to use less water and survive in harsher climates, he added.

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But clubs are balancing water-usage concerns against the customer experience. Local governments often rely on taxes associated with golf courses – including from hotel stays, events, and food and beverage consumption – to help sustain vital operations, he added.

The United States Golf Association, which pegs total water consumption of all golf courses at about 1% of nationwide water use, has also been working on the issue of water conservation. [It introduced a tool in April](#) to compare actual water use on a golf course to expected demand, helping operators track and adjust their water usage.

[A USGA survey of golf course superintendents, assistants and turf-grass researchers](#), among others, of the top challenges facing the golf industry found

water supply and constraints as the top concern. That beat out a lack of qualified and skilled labor and extreme weather.

Many country clubs also now have the capital to pursue these projects. Clubs collectively saw their median revenue rise over the course of the pandemic, surging more than 23% from 2019 to 2022, according to a review of more than 2,000 nonprofit country clubs by *The Business Journals*. That came with a median 8% growth in expenses, giving clubs room to grow.

"We are going to be seeing a lot more use of reclaimed water and that water being put through the cycle two, three or four times rather than single-use water. And that will have a huge impact on golf courses," Morris said.

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