

Lake drinks a lot of water

Chollas, which is used only for recreation, loses millions of gallons each year

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SAN DIEGO – San Diego, a city teetering close to mandatory water conservation, spends at least \$140,000 annually to pump about 53 million gallons of drinking water into Chollas Lake for fishing.

Chollas Lake, a 16-acre basin in southeastern San Diego, is unique because it is not one of the city's tap water reservoirs. That is, the water isn't being saved for future drinking or showers.

The Park and Recreation Department says the lake is an acceptable use of city water and money because it supports youth fishing and is the centerpiece of the much-loved Chollas Lake Park.

Critics question this use of ever-more-precious drinking water when the city is urging residents to conserve 20 gallons a day.

“Can we afford to be putting especially treated water that could be used for drinking water in a big man-made hole so people can fish?” said Geoffrey Smith, a San Diego consultant who has worked for consumer activists. “There are plenty of reservoirs in the county where fishing is allowed but water is held for potable use.”

Neighborhood advocates say the city should drain the lake, use money from recently passed Proposition C to line it to avoid water loss, and refill it in a few years.

If the city advances to a Stage 2 water emergency in the spring, it might stop replenishing the lake anyway.

A spokeswoman for Mayor Jerry Sanders said the city will re-evaluate all water used for recreation at that point. A comparable water use would be the \$135,000 spent annually on fields around Ocean Beach's Robb Field.

“If we need bigger cuts . . . maybe Chollas Lake will be one of them,” said spokeswoman Rachel Laing.

City Heights resident Theresa Quiroz appeared before the City Council recently to suggest lining the



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Luis Espinoza (left) and his son Sebastian, 4, joined others at Chollas Lake in southeastern San Diego. Some residents want the lake lined to prevent water loss. Others say the city should not be refilling it when conservation is needed.

lake, which was built as a reservoir in 1901 but hasn't been part of the drinking water system since at least 1966.

“The price of water is just going up and up, while the money that Park and Rec has keeps going down and down,” said Quiroz, whose family goes to the lake on Sunday afternoons.

The last thing she wants is for the city to close the lake because of ongoing water loss. Proposition C, passed by voters in November, sets aside money for a handful of city parks, including Chollas.

“This is the perfect time to do this,” Quiroz said.

Parks director Stacey LoMedico said a liner could cost \$400,000, and labor probably would push the project price up to \$1.5 million or so. There's also concern that a liner could harm the fish stocked in the lake. LoMedico said her office hasn't looked closely at specifics because officials don't believe there is a leak that can be plugged.

Chollas Lake appears to be unique in the county. Other reservoirs – Lake Murray and Miramar, for example – are filled by rain, runoff and water piped in by the San Diego County Water Authority. The water is held until it's needed for drinking, then it is treated and piped out to homes and businesses.

Chollas has no purpose other than recreation. The artificial lake is reserved for fishing for children 15 and younger.

The surrounding Chollas Lake Park is popular with adults, however. The parking lot is often packed with the cars of people using the dirt path around the lake for walks and jogging. Rustic play equipment is available for children.

Southeastern San Diego residents have been protective of their lake. The community got into an uproar in 2007 when a rumor spread that the city was going to stop filling the lake because of the cost to the Water Department. The park department took over the costs in its budget.

City officials subsequently studied the lake's water use. They determined that 48 million gallons yearly are lost to two factors: evaporation and a sponging effect from the 17 acres of eucalyptus trees that surround the lake. Eucalyptuses are thirsty trees with deep roots, and the city believes they are drinking considerable amounts of water.

Also, water is delivered to the lake via trenches atop the banks. It's an inefficient method, LoMedico said, and probably accounts for some of the water loss.

The dam also leaks a bit, the city says. Water lost in that manner is estimated at 260,000 gallons annually. An undetermined amount also seeps into the ground below the lake.

Chollas Lake Recreation Council member John Stump doubts the city's math. Stump said he believes much more water is leaking into South Chollas Landfill nearby and possibly into Chollas Creek.

The city has said it can't say definitively whether the lake water is entering the landfill, which is also unlined.

For these reasons, Stump is another proponent of lining Chollas Lake.

“We have the Prop. C money; we have the crisis; we have need,” he said. “It's time to make a long-term investment.”

On a recent weekday morning, several boys were casting their poles into the greenish water. Their chaperone was Mike Ito of La Mesa, a neighbor of the boys' foster home.

“This is a great resource for the kids,” said Ito, who was wearing a United Anglers of Southern California ball cap.

“Adults can drop off the kids to fish, and they can walk around the lake. It's a chance to get them out of the house, away from electronics and video games.”

Nine-year-old Kyle Harvey said he has fished there at least 15 times, though he had never caught anything.

“It's just fun,” said Kyle, sporting a blond crew cut and a sunburned nose.

Ito said water is better used at the lake than by automatic sprinklers that overspray at some people's homes. Karen Franz of San Diego Coastkeeper agrees.

“Looking at some of the other ways we use water, this is really minor compared to, say, the 60 to 70 percent of residential water use going to landscape irrigation,” said Franz, Coastkeeper's watershed program director. “That's something we need to address and has a much, much greater impact on the region.”

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