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New study provides fuel for both sides of artificial turf fight

By GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER

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SANTA CRUZ -- Residents for and against fake grass playing fields should find ammunition in a recently released report from UC Berkeley, which concludes that player injuries drop on artificial turf but significant greenhouse gases are released in its creation.

The report crunched data from 111 scientific studies on the controversial topic, which has become a hot topic in the county after the Board of Supervisors last year gave preliminary approval to install artificial turf at Anna Jean Cummings Park in Soquel.

Berkeley researchers reviewed more than 12 years of research as the debate over artificial turf plays out in communities nationwide.

The report was compiled "to make sure that the resources that were referred to were reasonable," said David Dornfeld, a Berkeley professor and director of the school's Laboratory for Manufacturing and Sustainability, which conducted the study.

Among the report's conclusions:

Artificial turf provides equal or better "playability" than natural turf;



Artificial turf can become hot and uncomfortable to play on in warmer months;



Artificial turf provides between 2,000 and 3,000 hours of playing time annually. Natural turf fields offer between 300 and 816 hours of playing time each year;



The cost to own and maintain artificial turf fields over a decade is 10 to 20 percent less than the cost of natural grass fields;



While artificial turf contains elements that could be toxic to humans, ordinary use does not expose players to levels considered dangerous;



Natural grass requires fertilizer, which could contaminate water supplies, and regular mowing, the emissions of which contribute to greenhouse gases. It also requires watering, which could tax a limited supply;



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Artificial turf releases more greenhouse gases in its the production, transportation and processing than the maintenance of natural turf ever would.

The study, Review of the Impacts of Crumb Rubber in Artificial Turf Applications, was commissioned by The Corporation for Manufacturing Excellence, an industry consulting firm. That company has, in the past, worked with California Integrated Waste Management Board to find ways to best recycle old tires. Those tire pieces often turn into the newest artificial playing fields.

The study was finished in February and released to the public last week. It arrives after the debate over artificial turf reached a head in Soquel in March. Dozens of neighbors there spoke out against the plans to install fake grass at Anna Jean Cummings Park, citing environmental concerns, traffic issues and noise complaints, among others. Soccer players, coaches and parents asked the county to press forward, pointing to a shortage of fields in the county and natural grass left unplayable by this year's rains.

Artificial turf also has been discussed for Aptos Polo Grounds County Park and Pinto Lake Park outside Watsonville.

Dornfeld said Manex did not pressure his department to report findings one way or the other.

"We were not put on any constraints to push, twist, color, distort or otherwise obfuscate results of the study. I believe it's quite objective," Dornfeld said.

County leaders have put their plans for artificial turf on hold and canceled the existing contract until a county committee can examine residents' concerns. Members of that group should be named in June.

"A study like this is good to have in the mix for this community," said Supervisor John Leopold, who proposed the committee following the uproar in Soquel, which is in his district.

Steve Volk, owner of The Ugly Mug in Soquel, said he previously was opposed to artificial turf, but as he learns more about the issue, now is not so sure.

"I don't have any answers anymore. It was easy when I didn't know anything," Volk joked. "I'm to the point where it's gray."

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