

A youth sports giant took over city land. Neighbors are fighting back.

Local advocates have called Surf Cup Sports' 120-acre complex "an environmental travesty" and accuse the city of San Diego of looking the other way.

By Roman Stubbs

August 13, 2024 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

DEL MAR, Calif. — Surf Sports Park, a sprawling 120-acre soccer complex nestled in the San Dieguito River Valley, was bustling on the third weekend of July. Thousands of teenage players competed on 22 fields. Dirt parking lots were packed with hundreds of vehicles and portable bathrooms. Spectators shopped in a village of retail tents, including a Nike store selling \$75 hoodies and a booth offering avocado toast bagels and empanadas. A banner hung above: "Welcome to the Proving Grounds."

These grounds, owned by the city of San Diego and leased to youth soccer giant Surf Cup Sports, have proved profitable. Surf says it creates \$120 million in economic impact for the region annually — boosting the bottom line for hotels, restaurants and other business — and gives kids a chance to earn scholarships by attracting nearly 1,500 college coaches to its sidelines for tournaments every year.

But these grounds also sit near an environmentally sensitive wetland home to a network of wildlife habitats, including several endangered species. Many residents have accused Surf of tainting the natural lands around its fields and wreaking havoc on their own lives through constant noise, traffic and pollution. The fight has spilled into the courtroom: One group of homeowners is suing the city for allowing Surf to hold activities that far exceed what the site's grant deed permits, while a resident is suing an affiliate of Surf for allegedly deceiving him into selling his property adjacent to the field.

The tension in Del Mar reflects how big and lucrative the youth sports industry has become — once a small all-star program in Southern California, Surf now has more than 50 clubs across the country — while also underscoring the impact it can have on communities. Since 2017, billions of dollars have been poured into youth sports facilities across the country, often testing local citizens and government leaders on how to spend tax dollars. In the past year alone, a \$175 million facility in Portland, Ore., and a multibillion-dollar complex in Tucson have been approved to be built by city officials.

"But unlike a lot of these other projects around the country, this was not community inspired and is not broadly supported," said Jeff Carmel, a Rancho Santa Fe resident who lives 300 yards from the fields. "... They're basically squatting on city land that has very strict use regulations. The city is looking the other way because it benefits from their presence."



Surf Cup Sports says it creates \$120 million in economic impact for the region annually with its tournaments at Surf Sports Park. (Sandy Huffaker for The Washington Post)

San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria (D) did not respond to a request for comment for this story. City Attorney Mara Elliott and city council member Joe LaCava (D), who oversees the district where Surf resides, declined to comment.

The fight between Surf and its neighbors has turned ugly at times. Aside from contentious litigation, residents have shown up with cameras and scuffled with Surf workers on the land, which for many years featured polo fields. A coalition of residents started posting [online](#) to inform others of Surf's activities, and Surf responded by launching its own website. None of this has stopped Surf from seeking expansion: It recently submitted a proposal for a new 48,000-square-foot indoor sports facility on a parcel adjacent to the soccer fields.

“We’ve really tried to be good neighbors,” said Brian Enge, Surf’s chief operating officer. “I don’t think these people will rest until this facility goes back to being pasture.”

The lawsuit was filed in April 2023 by the Fairbanks Polo Club Homeowners Association, which oversees a neighborhood near the fields. It accuses the city of allowing Surf to host events up to 200 days per year, which it says violates a 1983 grant deed that sets a limit of 25 days of activity on the land annually and restricts operations to “passive noncommercial uses.” Surf intervened and joined the lawsuit in May. Enge has argued that the 25-day limit is “a narrative that people have just adopted.”

“This battle is representative of the fact that youth sports are significant. It has become a very, very big ... business is the wrong word. ... It’s a very big project and a piece of American society today,” Enge said. “You’re going to see that battle continue to increase. You’re finding youth sports bring a lot of value to communities, both for family activity and economically. But does it encroach oftentimes on use of open or public land? Yeah, and this is represented in that.”

Maggie Brown, 81, is the president of Friends of San Dieguito River Valley, a local advocacy group that sought to require an Environmental Impact Report before the city approved the Surf lease in 2016. That lawsuit and a subsequent appeal were denied by a San Diego County judge who determined “the intensity of use will not increase under the Lease.”

Since it took over the lease in 2016, Surf has had a robust operation. It features an elite local club of more than 1,500 kids that practices multiple weekday afternoons and holds a handful of large annual tournaments that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors from across the country. Surf’s complex also hosts a youth football league run by former NFL star Drew Brees, and in 2022 it became the practice facility of the San Diego Wave, a National Women’s Soccer League team.



The 120-acre soccer complex attracts 1,500 college coaches to its sidelines for tournaments every year. (Sandy Huffaker for The Washington Post)

The constant activity has irked homeowners who once enjoyed peace and quiet in their backyards when land belonged to the polo club; now they say they are treated to an endless soundtrack of referee whistles and the voices of parents yelling. Neighborhood roads are often clogged with weekend traffic, and residents have complained about clouds of dust that drift toward their homes caused by the hundreds of cars ferrying kids on dirt roads and parking lots around the facility.

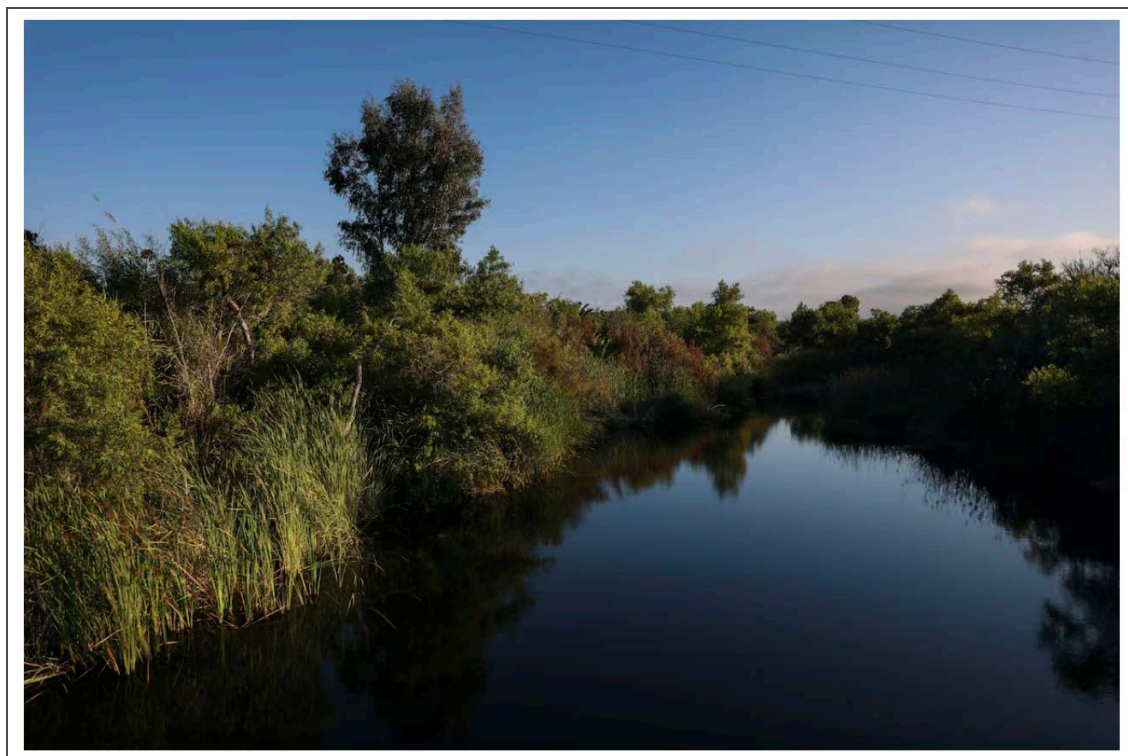
On the first day of a major tournament in late June, drivers were caught in gridlock traffic near the fields

as a brush fire burned a few miles away on a hillside in Del Mar. Had the fire been any closer, Carmel said, it “could have been a disaster.”

For nearly 40 years, Brown has worked to preserve the valley in Del Mar, which sits about two miles inland from where the San Dieguito River empties into the Pacific Ocean. There was cattle grazing in the 19th century, and bean and tomato fields were present in the early part of the 20th century. The site was known as the home of polo fields for decades before Surf took over.

Brown said she used to see an abundance of wildlife on this wetland — geese would pool in the water and deer would cross — “but they don’t come anymore,” she said. Brown blames the chain-link fences that Surf erected around their property for blocking wildlife corridors.

“It’s not a river valley anymore but a massive commercial venture,” Brown said. “... It’s an environmental invasion, an environmental travesty.”



Surf was cited last year for illegally redirecting stormwater through a marsh area that led to the San Dieguito River. (Sandy Huffaker for The Washington Post)

Surf has been cited multiple times for environmental violations, including last year when it was penalized for illegally redirecting stormwater through a marsh area that led to the San Dieguito River. In 2022, it was issued a penalty by the city for illegal grading and filling of land on the property.

“We’ve had leadership change in the last couple of years. There’s no doubt that part of the old regime used to maybe cut some corners on some of that stuff,” Enge said. “All that stuff has been fixed, and we are in very good standing.”

Enge has grown used to defending Surf’s environmental efforts; he said the company removed several invasive grass species and hired a firm to manage the ecological sensitivity of a historic trail that runs along the property. They brought in water trucks to dampen the dirt parking lots to avoid dust accumulation and spent \$3 million on grass in the past two years alone, Enge said.

Brown visited the grounds several times to take photos of land grading and water pumping. Surf has

accused her of harassing employees on the property and attempting to block a worker operating heavy machinery. A Surf employee took photos of Brown after the confrontation; some of the photos were eventually posted on a website called [Friends of Surf Sports Park](#), which Enge said was created because “we had to stick up for ourselves.”

Enge said he did not know how many days per year the fields are used. Carmel and Brown track Surf’s activities and said the fields are being used for practices and games more than 200 days per year.

“If they’re limited to 25 days a year, they’ll be put out of business,” Carmel said. “... Their business model is based on a faulty premise that they can do what they want without any oversight.”



“This was not community inspired and is not broadly supported,” Jeff Carmel, left, said of Surf. (Sandy Huffaker for The Washington Post)

Surf also has eyed expansion. In 2022, it purchased 24 acres of land adjacent to its soccer fields; the land originally had been intended for an assisted living development, but that project fell apart after eight years of planning. An affiliate of Surf is facing another lawsuit [filed](#) in April, when the former owner of land adjacent to the fields, Corwyn Ha’o, alleged he was deceived into selling his property to an individual affiliated with Surf in 2021.

“Ha’o was manipulated into transferring the Property to the very people he has been fighting against for years,” the lawsuit states.

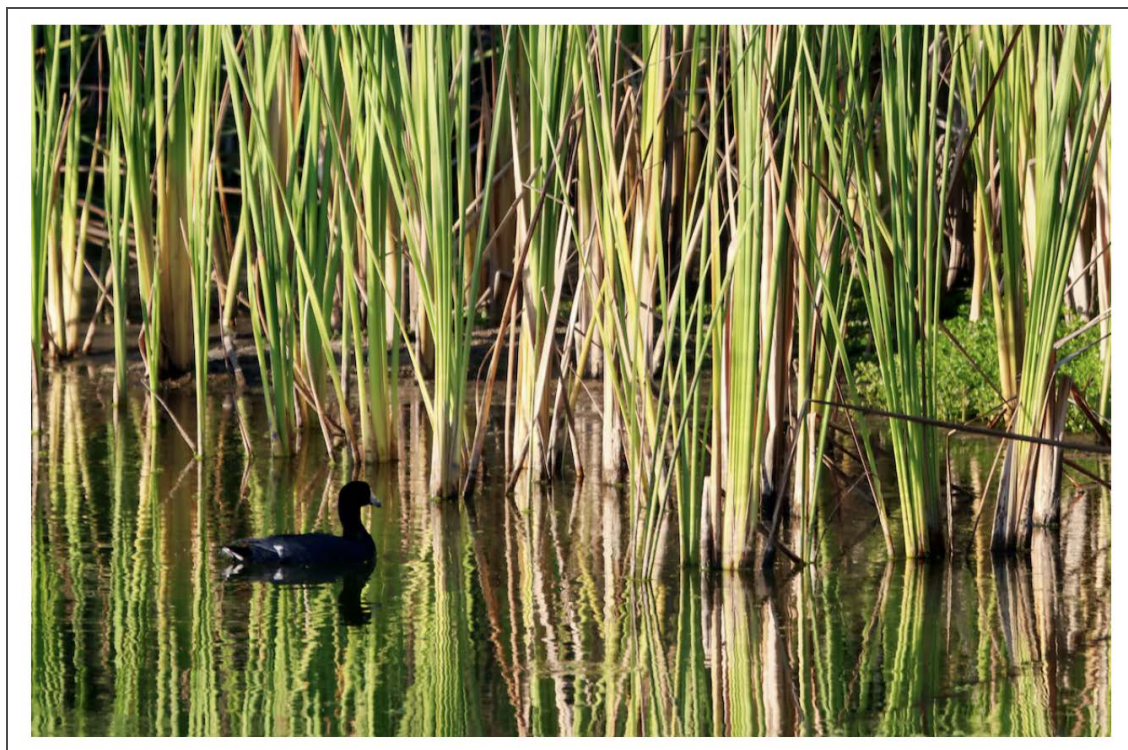
The application for the new indoor facility has proposed a 48,000-square-foot multipurpose building containing locker rooms, a player lounge, offices, three basketball courts, three volleyball courts, 17 pickleball courts, two outdoor soccer fields and 346 parking spaces.

Enge said he is unsure if the facility will ever be built. Brown has devoted her retirement years to making sure it won’t happen. They have met for lunch several times over the years but have been unable to settle their differences; it’s in the hands of the court now.

“Our focus needs to be on the kids and their needs,” Enge said.

On a recent afternoon, Brown visited a ranger station near the fields. Despite the arthritis in her hip, she hiked a nearby trail to a pavilion that overlooked the valley. It used to be quiet there, but now she sat with herself and listened as whistles and the screams of parents and coaches echoed. She gazed at an untouched piece of wetland that borders the fields and raised her arms.

“This,” she said, “is what we’re trying to save.”



Surf Sports Park sits near an environmentally sensitive wetland home to a network of wildlife habitats.
(Sandy Huffaker for The Washington Post)