

El Toro golf-course plans headed for the rough

REUSE: The county would like to expand the current facility onto a toxic landfill.

By **MARY ANN MILBOURN**
The Orange County Register

The first major battle over El Toro toxic cleanup could involve the unlikely of issues — a golf course.

County planners want to expand the base golf course onto a former landfill. The Marines say their cleanup scenario makes that entirely possible, as long as the course is not watered.

"They want to throw some more dirt on it, then fence it off, and the restrictions will prohibit

irrigation," Greg Hurley, head of the citizens advisory panel overseeing El Toro cleanup, said Wednesday. "You could (make a golf course) with AstroTurf, but you couldn't step on it — it will be fenced off. It will be a complete dead zone."

Marine Capt. Matt Morgan, El Toro base-reuse spokesman, said the Marines' proposed plan won't become final until March, but it appears to be the most cost-effective approach and still would allow for a golf course.

The Marines' plan, which meets federal health and environmental standards, calls for covering the landfill four feet deep with soil and monitoring it to ensure toxic materials don't

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migrate. Irrigation would be strictly limited.

"They can have a golf course," Morgan said. "It may take a little creative planning, but it doesn't prevent it."

What the Marines will not do, he said, is remove the landfill.

"You are talking about \$13 million to cap and monitor (the landfill) vs. a \$33 million project to remove it," Morgan said. "The Department of Defense is not in the business of throwing away millions of dollars to give a complete slate of unrestricted (clean) land."

Morgan said the landfill site off Perimeter Road involves only nine acres.

"We're going to give them 3,700 acres of unrestricted land," Morgan said. "To come down to a fight over a golf course doesn't make sense."

Courtney Wiercioch, head of the county El Toro reuse program, said the staff is talking to the Marines.

"Clearly, the county's primary concern is that (cleanup) allows us to implement the reuse plan efficiently and effectively," Wiercioch said. The issue came up Wednesday night at a meeting of the citizen's advisory board.

Hurley said he and other board members feel betrayed because they had studied an alternate cleanup plan, including a cost assessment, but stopped when the Marines indicated their concerns were being dealt with.

"We received a definite understanding (that) the military would do whatever is necessary to turn the landfill over to the county to accommodate the reuse plan," Hurley said.

The matter goes beyond a potential golf course, Hurley said. It raises questions about how far the Marines are willing to go to ensure their cleanup plans allow the county to develop the base to its best potential.

That was underscored by a letter to the county from John E. Scandura, who oversees military facilities in Southern California for the state Department of Toxic Substances Control.

He expressed his concern that the Marines' plan would not allow the golf course and warned that federal policy could leave the county paying for cleanup — and taking on liability for any problems.

"A policy has been in development by the Department of Defense (DOD) that might limit DOD's cleanup obligation for (base closure) property transfers," Scandura wrote.

He noted that once the military's El Toro cleanup plan is approved and the base is closed, the Marines have no obligation to return or pay for additional cleanup to make a site useable.

Ron Baker, spokesman for the state Department of Toxic Substances Control, said Wednesday that the state cannot support the plan as it is currently written. Federal law requires community and state support of any cleanup plan.