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Point of View: West Palm Beach should ban fake turf

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On Monday, the City of West Palm Beach discussed lifting the ban on synthetic turf in front lawns. Currently, the city's code enforcement only allows artificial turf in backyards and side yards.

Fake turf has emerged as a dubious answer to growing water scarcity concerns. These concerns have been heightened amidst crippling droughts in the American West, and the recent drought locally.

Residents and public officials have asked, why is turf allowed in some areas, but not others? The more important question is, should we be using fake turf at all?

Perhaps not. There are serious safety concerns with artificial turf. Recently, the Environmental Protection Agency acknowledged that synthetic turf contains toxic chemicals, some of which are known to cause cancer. These harmful compounds leach into the water table and can off-gas and be inhaled when turf becomes too hot (up to 200 degrees.)

Additionally, studies now show that both the turf backing and the artificial grass blades contain the highly toxic fluorinated chemicals, commonly known as "forever chemicals" because they do not break down in nature or in the human body. These have been linked to lower childhood immunity, endocrine disruption and cancer.

There are also environmental concerns. To prevent health risks, turf must be regularly treated with biocides – compounds designed to kill an even wider array of microorganisms than pesticides – that end up in the groundwater. Animal droppings leave bacteria that doesn't dissipate if it's not treated with biocides.

Artificial turf not only requires fossil fuels to manufacture but is also notoriously difficult to dispose of. Synthetic turf fields need to be replaced every 8-10 years. There are industry

guidelines for recycling, but it's questionable as to how much, if any, discarded turf is actually recycled.

There are more responsible ways to address water scarcity issues, such as reclaimed water. It is a cheap and sustainable water supply for irrigation that reduces withdrawals from our aquifers and scales back wastewater discharges into the ocean. Each day, roughly 15 million gallons are distributed by the Palm Beach County Water Utilities Department to local golf courses and residential lawns.

Expansion of reclaimed water access should trump any debate over allowing a toxic, impervious, bacteria magnet that dramatically increases our carbon footprint.

Long is chairman of the Palm Beach Soil & Water Conservation District.