

Better late than never for the Salton Sea

Ira Laufer, Palm Springs Desert Sun, 5-30-10

The inaugural Salton Sea Stakeholder's Symposium Thursday would have been a huge success — if it was held five years ago.

That's not the fault of the Valley Action Group, which staged the symposium. Their very existence as interested entities in the Coachella Valley represent a chilling reality that all the parties involved to date have confused the issue, confused the public and confused each other. Finally, local organizations involved as “stakeholders” have coalesced to discuss this problem openly.

Aside from trying to unravel this enigma known as the Salton Sea, this symposium had two other firsts.

Plans all in one place

It marked the first time that the major proposed plans to save the sea were shown in public at the same time. This explains the confusion that existed every time an official or quasi-official group unveiled a plan to save the sea. There are lots of plans.

Actually, there have been more than 50 plans suggested through the years but only the plans proposed by the feds, the state and the local Salton Sea Authority carry weight. Only the feds (U.S. Bureau of Water Reclamation) and the state (Department of Water Resources) have the potential to fund anything. The problem is that all three plans have different goals and different solutions. These three programs must be merged, somehow.

The other major asset of this meeting was that it is the first time all major players agreed that doing nothing may be the worst plan of all. The Desert Sun published my Valley Voice column on Jan. 21 stating that the biggest problem is doing nothing and we are relieved to see the major players have finally realized that. The evidence of this problem was uncovered five years ago but no one was paying attention to that aspect.

Impressive wetlands

I wrote in January, “Although the sea lies 10 to 20 miles away from our cities it is ultra-serious. It could affect our health, our livability and our tourist industry, which has economic disaster proportions.”

Many of the speakers Thursday echoed those thoughts, which means the message has finally been received and the local groups now know the potential danger and hopefully will be the force that pushes the major players to a consensus that we can all get behind.

One nice moment in the meeting was the display and discussion of the Torres-Martinez Wetlands program. It shows great ingenuity and has definite expansion potential.

Renewable energy

In the afternoon part of the symposium, that program and other uses in and around the sea were discussed. It clearly displayed the area has many uses as an energy source for geothermal and solar explorations. The geothermal potential has been tapped for years successfully and now solar will possibly be entering the picture.

However, one attendee at the symposium, representing a large solar power potential, told me that if the fear of a dried-up lake bed and possible dust bowl status weren't forestalled, his company would not make any investment in the area.

So, on the big picture, the symposium was a success. It clearly showed us we have work to do and pointed out why it's so important.

If we don't get consensus on one plan, we may be having these symposiums for many years trying to save ourselves from a major problem. These three entities must be brought together to reach a consensus.

Who will step up to the plate and start the action?