

Salton Sea inaction could cause 'catastrophic change,' report says

Tony Perry, Los Angeles Times, 9-4-14

Saving the beleaguered Salton Sea will be expensive, but allowing it to continue deteriorating will cost even more in terms of dollars, unemployment, property values and damage to public health, according to a study released Wednesday by the Pacific Institute.

Straddling Riverside and Imperial counties, the Salton Sea has never attracted the political constituency of the state's other bodies of water -- Lake Tahoe, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta or the San Francisco Bay.

Studies have been done and largely ignored, as the report by the Oakland environmental think tank notes.

If we work together, we can prevent a looming economic, environmental and public health crisis while also creating new jobs in clean energy at the sea.- U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer

But the rotten-egg stench inflicted over much of Southern California in 2012 by the sea is only a taste of what is to come if the Pacific Institute report, financed by the Bureau of Reclamation, is correct.

A Salton Sea revitalization plan endorsed by the California Natural Resources Agency in 2007 is now estimated at \$10 billion, with costs adjusted for 2013, according the report.

But the damage to public health, property values, agricultural production, recreational assets, as well as the ecology, could cost between \$29 billion and \$70 billion over 30 years, according to the report, which was written by senior researcher Michael Cohen, with research assistance by graduate student Jason Sauer.

"The assumption seems to be that delaying action at the Salton Sea will result in business as usual, with no additional costs," the report warns. "This is clearly not the case."

While the sea's woes have long been pointed out, the Pacific Institute argues that it is entering "a period of very rapid deterioration," with salinity destined to triple. More dried seabed will also be exposed to the air, leading to 100 tons of dust full of sediment and small-grain particles blowing into the air every day.

"The magnitude of these costs and the scale of the problem, as well as the absence of a consensus solution, have discouraged legislators from funding Salton Sea revitalization efforts and have become a ready excuse for postponing meaningful action," the report concludes.

Shallow, salty, tea-colored and covering 350 square miles, the sea was created in 1905 when the Colorado River overflowed and flowed northward into a dry lake bed. The sea has no source of fresh water, existing mainly on agricultural runoff and as a terminus for the noxious New River as it winds north from Mexicali.

As the report points out, the 2003 water sale between the Imperial Irrigation District and the San Diego County Water Authority has led to a reduction in agricultural runoff needed to replenish the sea.

Under the water deal, Imperial agreed to sell a portion of its mammoth allotment from the Colorado River to San Diego. Less water on crops means less runoff for the sea.

For the first 15 years of the 45-year deal, the irrigation district is required to put water into the Salton Sea to compensate for the loss of runoff. But that clause in the deal expires in 2017, which could lead to the sea rapidly shrinking.

The water deal included a promise from the state government to step up its efforts on the Salton Sea. But so far, the state has not fulfilled that promise.

U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-California) called the report “alarming” and said it highlights the “urgent need” to take action to protect the Salton Sea.

“If we work together, we can prevent a looming economic, environmental and public health crisis while also creating new jobs in clean energy at the sea,” she said.

With the 2017 deadline approaching, the Imperial Irrigation District and the Imperial County Board of Supervisors -- two bodies often at political odds -- agreed last year on a plan to raise money for the Salton Sea by encouraging additional geothermal energy exploration on the eastern edge of the sea. Money would come from energy sales.

But the regular legislative session in Sacramento this year ended with no action on a bill by state Sen. Ben Hueso (D-San Diego) and Assemblyman V. Manuel Perez (D-Coachella) that would have required utilities to buy a portion of their energy from geothermal sources.

SB1139 did not come to the floor, but discussion of the bill may continue during the interim session.

Salton Sea projects could also receive funding under the \$7.5 billion water bond that will be on the November ballot. Among the projects listed as eligible for financing are those linked to the Imperial-San Diego water sale.

Decades ago, the Salton Sea attracted Hollywood celebrities looking to have fun in the sun, to party at the marinas and hotels along the shoreline and to go fishing and water skiing. Then came the sea’s problems, including a rising water level and concerns about whether the fish were edible.

“The hotels and marinas and stores that once prospered along the sea’s shoreline have long since shut their doors,” authors said in the Pacific Institute report, “Hazard’s Toll: The Costs of Inaction at the Salton Sea.”

The sea’s future, unless a rescue effort is mounted, involves “catastrophic change,” they added.