

How Salton Sea's geothermal resources could help save it

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The smell of rotten eggs too often fills the air around the Coachella and Imperial Valleys. This horrible stench occurs when dangerously high levels of hydrogen sulfide — a gas that can cause headaches, cardiovascular complications and even death — emanates from the ever-disappearing Salton Sea. This is a sneak preview of what residents in Southern California should expect as California's largest inland lake, three times the size of Owens Lake, continues to rapidly shrink. We need to act now to protect it. Inaction is not an option as the health of tens of thousands of Californians in some of the state's most vulnerable communities hangs in the balance.

We've seen some positive developments in the past year. The state set aside \$80 million for management projects and this summer the federal government identified the sea as a "critical" priority. But this is not enough. We have a long way to go, and unfortunately there is a real lag between state actions and the rapid physical changes at the Salton Sea, which will accelerate after 2017 when "mitigation water" required under a water transfer agreement between Imperial Irrigation District and San Diego ends.

If the Salton Sea disappears, it will have devastating impacts on communities — largely made up of low-income, people of color — who sometimes feel like they are breathing more pollution than oxygen. Failure to control the growing dust could result in public health costs increasing from \$360 million in 2014 to \$1.4 billion in 2025 and to about \$2 billion per year after 2035. If we don't act now, it guarantees more kids will have respiratory illness into adulthood, with many visits to the emergency room along the way.

The health of children is not the only crisis here. The loss of the Salton Sea will decimate habitat that is critical to California's wildlife and our ecosystem. As the lake recedes, rising water salinity will make the lake increasingly uninhabitable for fish and the over 400 species of birds who depend on it. This resource has become more important for birds as over 90 percent of wetlands across California have been destroyed — the most in the nation. Some bird species could go extinct if the Salton Sea goes away because so much of their population relies on it.

Meanwhile, the Salton Sea region has some of the best and largest geothermal resources in the United States. According to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, at a minimum there is a potential for at least 1,350 megawatts of new geothermal to be developed at the Salton Sea by 2030.

Geothermal resources can play an important role in the sea's restoration. This clean energy resource is reliable and will reduce the need to burn more fossil fuels. On top of cutting climate altering pollution, geothermal projects can cover exposed playa, which will reduce dust emissions that damage the lungs of all who lives in the area. In addition to cutting emissions over the long-term, geothermal energy will provide steady power when other clean energy resources ramp down. Additionally, the massive amounts of geothermal potential brings incredible opportunities to create career paths into good middle-class jobs with family health care, skilled apprenticeship training and pension retirement.

If we build out just 500 megawatts of geothermal, it will create millions of works hours in construction, operations and maintenance jobs for a region that suffers from a 21 percent unemployment rate. The taxes and other revenue sources will help local governments.

So what's the hold up? The California Public Utilities Commission and big corporations look solely at the

upfront contract price and do not consider the future environmental costs or benefits when choosing a renewable energy resource. So they haven't signed a contract for a new geothermal facility, and hence a new geothermal plant hasn't been built at the Salton Sea in years. The governor's own Salton Sea task force, recognizing this problem, recommended the state's Energy Commission, Public Utilities Commission and Independent System Operator consider the benefits of renewables at the Salton Sea in their planning — but this has yet to happen.

Geothermal is not the whole solution to saving the Salton Sea, but it is a step in the right direction. This is not just an opportunity to expand on California's clean energy success, but also a critical moment to protect public health and save California's largest inland lake — an ecosystem that is critical to our state and the hundreds of thousands of lives that surrounds it.