

# Fading Salton Sea Thirsting For Water

Erik Anderson, KPBS News, 9-2-16

Tom Anderson stands on an overlook on the southern edge of the shallow lake. Red Rock Hill rises up near the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, where Anderson is a deputy project manager.

Anderson works to reclaim habitat for shore birds that come here to forage and feed.

Agricultural runoff and evaporation team up to concentrate the salt in this land-locked lake, according to Anderson. That leaves the lake significantly saltier than the Pacific Ocean. The Salton Sea is also getting smaller.

"The Salton Sea is shrinking — and this is a parcel of land," he pointed to a flat 500-acre playa, "that used to be part of the Salton Sea," Anderson said.

Those dusty playas are getting bigger.

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"The sea has receded. It's dropped about 4 feet in the last 10 years. And this is no longer wet. It used to be great shore-bird habitat. Shallow water all the way across," Anderson said.

## A shrinking Salton Sea carries consequences

The sea is shrinking because there is less water flowing in and the brutal desert heat is very good at evaporation.

"So this was dry playa," Anderson said as he stands on a wide expanse of grey soil. "We drove across it at one point. And then on a windy day, winds pushed the Salton Sea back up onto this playa and flooded some of the lower areas, including these tire tracks. And when that water evaporated, it left behind the salts and minerals. And this shows just how salty the Salton Sea is."

The playa is crusty as it dries. Anderson swept his foot across the grey dirt and the crust easily became a fine dust, almost like talcum powder, easily picked up by the valley's notoriously strong winds.

"It is like billowing clouds of that fine material off the playa," Anderson said.

Tom Anderson talking about the shrinking Salton Sea on July 1, 2016.

Imperial County already has the highest childhood asthma rates in California and officials worry the new dust will make that problem worse. Here at Red Hill Bay, about 500 acres of dry playa will be flooded to control dust and create shorebird habitat, but that is hardly a comprehensive solution.

"We've seen about, probably about 13,000 acres of shoreline exposed over the last 10 to 12 years and it's pretty dramatic if you go out to the southern portion of the sea, where it's shallow," Anderson said.

The Salton Sea is getting saltier and that is pushing bird and fish populations to an ecological precipice. Huge die-offs just over a decade ago couldn't create momentum for a solution, because cost estimates soared to \$9 billion. That price tag killed restoration efforts but there is new urgency to get something done.

The Imperial Irrigation District controls both power and water in this desert valley and the public agency has long wrestled with the health of the Salton Sea.

"The sea has always had its challenges because it is an inland body of water. It has no fresh water source or drainage and the runoff from the cities and storm water supports the sea. So it has had a constant challenge with increasing salinity," said Tina Shields, the district's water manager.

### **The search for a Salton Sea solution has moved in fits and spurts**

The region has been waiting for a solution to the lake's woes for years, Shields said.

The countdown began in earnest just over a decade ago. California agreed to restore the Salton Sea as part of a deal to get the Imperial Irrigation District to sign onto a sweeping multi-state water-sharing deal.

The Quantification Settlement Agreement promised to end feuding over Colorado River Water and it cleared the way for the Imperial Irrigation District to sell water to urban areas. Long multi-year deals were quickly signed.

"Every acre-foot of water that's transferred to either the San Diego or Coachella is an acre-foot of water that's removed from the Salton Sea," Shields said. "So we've been providing mitigation flows since 2003 in an amount that's intended to equalize the salinity level."

But those mitigation flows stop at the end of 2017 and water shipments to urban areas are ramping up at the same time.

The district's computer modeling estimates some 75,000 acres of playa will be exposed over the next three decades, raising concerns about public health.

### **California is making a financial commitment**

California put \$80 million for Salton Sea restoration work into the state budget this year. The California Natural Resources Agency's Bruce Wilcox concedes the effort should have started years ago and this first round of spending is little more than a starting point.

"There would've been a much easier process if we'd have started earlier," Wilcox said. "But moving forward, we can construct this habitat. We've got the money to construct some of it right now. We'll get more funding moving forward."

That state commitment is crucial and the multibillion-dollar restoration effort will have to ramp up quickly. Wilcox is confident the state will be able to line up the funding as the project moves forward. Wilcox says there's more at stake than the health of the Imperial Valley.

"If we're not successful at the Salton Sea, and I think we will be, but if we're not, that certainly would put a red flag up for future water transfers and it might even impact this water transfer," Wilcox said.

The possibility of interrupted water transfers has the attention of a lot of people in California and that could be enough to keep the restoration momentum moving forward.

That movement is welcomed by National Wildlife Refuge project manager Tom Anderson who said change is coming quickly.

Lake levels are already dropping an inch or two a year and that could increase to a foot a year when the mitigation water stops flowing at the end of next year.

"Because the shoreline is so gradual, one foot, in certain areas could really be a wide expanse of shoreline that's exposed," Anderson said.