

# Save the Salton Sea before it's too late

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It's time for action on the state's largest lake before it turns into the nation's biggest toxic dust bowl.

Well-intentioned calls for reclamation need to be augmented with genuine leadership.

According to Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley, who chairs the Salton Sea Authority, every year another 600 to 700 acres of sea floor is exposed. As the water level shrinks, the more salty the sea becomes. It will be harder for fish to live, taking away the food supply for tens of thousands of wild birds.

"You can count on your hands the number of years before it becomes a dead sea," Ashley said.

Six years ago this month, the U.S. secretary of the interior, the state of California, the Coachella Valley Water District, the Imperial Irrigation District and the San Diego County Water Authority struck an agreement for the largest water transfer in history.

The deal was struck under pressure from the federal government for the state to reduce its overuse of Colorado River water. It limits the liability of the Imperial Irrigation District to \$113 million, all of which will be spent controlling the environmental harm the water transfer will cause.

It's not nearly enough.

## **State responsibility**

It was widely assumed the Quantification Settlement Agreement that was part of the transfer obligated the state to restore the Salton Sea. However, that issue is still up in the air. A court hearing is scheduled for Wednesday in Sacramento in which lawyers will debate what the legislators intended in 2003.

Regardless of the legal wrangling, California certainly has an obligation to clean up the most serious environmental problem in Southern California.

The agreement frustrates Rep. Mary Bono Mack, whose late husband Sonny Bono championed restoration of the lake.

"Kicking this up to Sacramento was a mistake," said the Palm Springs Republican. She has aggressively picked up the cause and would like to get the Army Corps of Engineers involved.

Since the agreement was signed, \$20 million has been spent on consultants and meetings, but little has been spent on the ground, according to Michael Cohen of the Pacific Institute, a nonpartisan research organization.

"The state is on the hook," he said, "but it has taken almost no action."

## **History**

The Colorado River once flowed into the Gulf of California. Historic evidence and geologic studies indicate that the river spilled into the Salton Basin many times over the millennia. Around 700 A.D., silt blocked the egress to the gulf and the river swung north into two overflow channels, creating Lake Cahuilla.

According to Kurt Russo of the Native American Land Conservancy, in 1500 the lake was three times the size of today's Salton Sea — 100 miles long, 30 miles wide and 300 feet deep in the center. Within 300 years it was dry again.

In the 1800s, the river flooded the basin at least eight times. Levees were built to control the flow, but during the flood of 1905 a breach in the Imperial Valley dike created the Salton Sea.

### **Recreational wonderland**

“All my kids learned to water ski there in the 1950s and '60s,” recalled Patricia “Corky” Larson, a former Riverside County supervisor who serves on the Salton Sea Authority. “For a long time, there were more visitors to the Salton Sea than to Yosemite.”

Sport fishing was first promoted at the Salton Sea in 1907, according to the authority. The sea became a playground for Hollywood stars and others who loved boating and fishing.

Tourism has declined with fish die-offs and the smell created by occasional emissions of hydrogen sulfide. But the area still gets about 150,000 visitors a year.

“It could be such an economic boon,” Larson said.

### **Dust in the wind**

While the recreational possibilities and visions of shoreline development are intriguing, the biggest reason to be concerned about the Salton Sea is the growing threat to air quality in the Imperial and Coachella valleys.

As the sea level declines and the shoreline recedes, more areas of dry lake bed, or playa, are exposed. The playa is covered with fine sediments deposited at the bottom of the lake. When the winds kick up, particulate matter goes airborne.

Over time, that fine dust can be trapped in your lungs, causing asthma attacks, bronchitis, lung disease and exacerbating heart conditions. Nearly 20 percent of children in the Imperial Valley have asthma, one of the highest rates in the state.

Supervisor Ashley says the threat to public health is serious.

“It's killing people now,” he said, “and it's only going to get worse.”

### **A wildlife paradise**

The other significant reason to save the sea is that it is one of the most significant sanctuaries for wild birds in North America.

“The Salton Sea is an essential stopover for migrating birds,” said Arturo Delgado, an environmental scientist with the state Department of Fish and Game in the Bermuda Dunes office. “It's a principle area for birds that use the Pacific Flyway.”

Development and agricultural has wiped out more than 90 percent of the wetlands in California, Delgado said.

More than 270 species of birds use the sea. Six of the bird species that frequent the sea, and a fish that thrives in the estuaries around it, are on federal endangered species list. More are on the California list.

Over the years, several ocean-going fish species were introduced in the Salton Sea, including orangemouth corvina, gulf croaker and sargo. Only tilapia and a few other hardy species survive.

Biologists fear that when the full impact of the water transfer is felt in 2018, the salinity level will be so high that tilapia won't be able to reproduce.

### **The state preferred plan**

The state has a plan, thanks to the efforts of state Sen. Denise Moreno Ducheny, D-San Diego, but the Legislature has not allocated money to enact it.

The state Department of Water Resources mapped out eight plans. None is cheap. Even the “no-action” plan would cost \$800 million because of essential programs to protect air quality. The “preferred alternative” would cost \$8.9 billion and includes:

- Saline habitat complexes at the north and south ends of the sea to maintain habitat for birds.
- A large marine sea in a horseshoe shape from the northern edge with a maximum depth of 40 feet. This would provide open water habitat for fish and birds plus recreational opportunities.
- A large area of exposed playa at the center of the sea, with facilities to reduce dust. The playa would be separated by a 52-mile barrier from San Felipe Creek to Bombay Beach.

It did allocate \$800,000 of federal money set aside for California river parkway programs, which frees \$4 million in money secured by Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, in 2005. That will help clean up New River, one of the most polluted waterways in North America, which flows into the sea.

### **Baby steps**

There has been some progress. The Torres- Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians constructed an 85-acre wetland at the north end of the sea. The federal government has built a 100-acre wetland at the south end, although that is in danger of being abandoned. In the next few weeks, six air-quality monitoring stations will be installed.

The state Department of Water Resources is moving ahead with a 2,400-acre species conservation habitat. As the sea recedes, a series of shallow ponds will be created with dikes built from materials excavated from the sea bed, said Cliff Feldheim, an environmental scientist with the department. Construction is expected to begin in late 2011.

### **Sea to sea**

The authority plans a symposium on Jan. 15 in Indian Wells to consider alternatives to the \$8.9 billion plan. Given the state's fiscal woes, a bond of that magnitude is unlikely.

The authority has an agreement with Utility Solutions Group to explore an intriguing idea called the Sea-to-Sea project. Water would be pumped into the sea from the Gulf of California in northern Mexico, 50 miles away.

Salt water from the sea and other sources would then be processed through a desalination plant powered by geothermal energy and sold to pay for restoration.

It would be an enormous undertaking, involving treaties with Mexico and much more. But it may take this kind of creative thinking to solve the problem, because waiting for the state to act is risky.

### **Our position**

The Salton Sea has been studied thoroughly. For years, there have been repeated calls for action. It's time for Sacramento to pay attention to this dusty little corner of the state.