

California will spend \$80 million on the Salton Sea. The lake's looming problems will require much more.

Ian James, The Desert Sun 3:47 p.m. PDT July 1, 2016



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California has budgeted more money than ever before for the Salton Sea, allocating \$80.5 million in the coming year to start building canals and artificial wetlands along portions of the receding shoreline.

The funds will enable state officials to take initial steps to control hazardous dust and create habitat for birds and fish along thousands of acres of exposed lakebed. That will start with the design of canals along the south shore to carry water from the New River and the Alamo River to areas of dry shoreline.

As that "infrastructure backbone" of canals is built, officials plan to construct shallow ponds to create expanding stretches of wetlands. The approach is intended to be a key line of defense against dust and ecological collapse as the lake shrinks and grows saltier.

"We should be able to build several thousand acres of wetlands and the delivery channel," said Bruce Wilcox, assistant secretary for Salton Sea policy at the California Natural Resources Agency. "We'll build as much infrastructure as we can."

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California is accelerating projects aimed at confronting looming environmental hazards at the Salton Sea, which is set to shrink more rapidly starting in 2018 as a water transfer deal kicks in and reduces inflows of water from the Colorado River.

State agencies have for years faced criticism for not moving more quickly to fix the Salton Sea's mounting environmental troubles. Wilcox said the funding in the budget signed this week by Gov. Jerry Brown is an important step that demonstrates a recognition of the state's responsibility to address the problems of California's largest lake.

"We should have been doing this 10 years ago. But in the last two and a half years, I think all of the stakeholders around the sea have come together," Wilcox said. "We now have a shared vision. I think each agency has a slightly different version, but a shared vision of how to move forward."



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[Slow progress on Salton Sea projects as time runs low](#)

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The state's evolving plans are focused on controlling dust and maintaining aquatic habitat around a "smaller but sustainable" Salton Sea. The \$80.5 million approved so far will cover only a small piece of the state's Salton Sea Management Program, which Wilcox said is likely to cost between \$2.5 billion and \$3.5 billion to carry out.

Joan Taylor, conservation chair of the Sierra Club's local Tahquitz Group, said she's pleased with the initial funding and hopes to see the plan fleshed out soon and supported with additional funding.

"I don't think there is truly a conceptual plan that everybody has agreed upon, so that's key," Taylor said.

"These are all projects that should have been started years ago, but better late than never," she said. "We really need to get going on them because there's this window of opportunity before the sea really collapses."

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[Federal government ups Salton Sea spending](http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2016/02/09/federal-government-ups-salton-sea-spending/80088812/)

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The Little Hoover Commission has also warned the state that it isn't moving quickly enough or providing sufficient funds for the Salton Sea.

In a June 24 letter to the governor and the Legislature, the independent oversight agency reiterated its concerns that "time is out and the state must act now to avert this disaster."

"Without immediate action, California faces a major health crisis," Jack Flanigan, the commission's vice chair, said in the letter. He pointed out that as the sea recedes, more lakebed will become exposed and increase the risks of windblown toxic dust, adding to the health problems in a part of the state that already has some of the worst air quality and highest asthma rates.

The commission recommended the state make the Salton Sea a top priority and ensure adequate funding to quickly carry out short-term projects and expedite long-term planning.

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A task force created by Brown last year has told state agencies to develop a plan for the sea and meet a short-term goal of carrying out projects to suppress dust and create habitat on 9,000 to 12,000 acres. Wilcox said the funding in this year's budget will help the state begin to move toward that goal.

A draft of the state's long-range plan will be prepared by the end of this year. Wilcox said that plan will consider ideas such as importing water to boost the lake's level and reclaiming portions of the dry shorelines for farmland where possible. In the meantime, he said, the state is pursuing incremental projects that will be beneficial no matter how the long-range plans develop.

The Salton Sea is 35 miles long and 15 miles wide. It was created in its current form starting in 1905, when an irrigation channel off the Colorado River was breached and water flooded into the basin. The water kept flowing in until 1907, when engineers put a stop to it.

Since then, the lake has been sustained largely by runoff from farms in the Imperial Valley. But that runoff has been decreasing and is set to decline dramatically in 2018, when more water will be transferred from the Imperial Valley to San Diego County and the Coachella Valley under a 2003 water transfer deal.



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The lake's rising salinity also threatens to kill off millions of fish, which help sustain populations of birds.

"If we lose the Salton Sea, I don't know where the birds are going to go. We've lost most of the wetlands all across California," Wilcox said Thursday night at a workshop in Palm Desert. "It would be a catastrophic loss if we didn't preserve some of the habitat at the Salton Sea, and that's why we're trying this program, to provide both air quality and habitat."

Wilcox has been leading a series of [workshops \(http://resources.ca.gov/salton-sea/\)](http://resources.ca.gov/salton-sea/) across Southern California to explain the state's plans.



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When a member of the audience asked about the possibility of bringing water by canal from the Sea of Cortez or the Pacific Ocean, Wilcox said the current projects don't preclude those possibilities.

"But the water import scenarios are very expensive," he added, "and it takes up-front money to do them that the state of California doesn't have right now."

With time running short, he said, the aim is to get going on incremental projects that will help.

"We're all tasked with making it work. It's not perfect. It's not a silver bullet. There isn't a perfect solution for the Salton Sea," Wilcox said. "I understand there is a tremendous amount of pent-up angst about the lack of progress at the Salton Sea. We think that we are moving forward at a reasonable pace now, and there certainly are issues that we've got to address as soon as we possibly can."

A bond measure proposed by Assembly member Eduardo Garcia also could provide substantial new funding. The \$3.1 billion bond proposal, if approved by the Legislature and passed by voters in Novembers, would include \$25 million to pay for additional projects at the Salton Sea.

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