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NEWS

SALTON SEA: Is Inland lake on road to revival?

The \$80 million proposed by Gov. Brown follows a year of progress for the environmentally devastated lake.

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By JANET ZIMMERMAN / STAFF WRITER
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SALTON SEA PROJECTS

- Red Hill Bay: Constuction is underway on this \$3.5 million project to pump and mix water from the Alamo River and the highly saline Salton Sea in two 210-acre holding ponds on the lake's southeastern shore to create bird habitat. Expected completion in June 2017.
- The Salton Sea Restoration & Renewable Energy Initiative, by the Imperial Irrigation District and Imperial County, would combine habitat with geothermal and other renewable energy projects on exposed lake bed to reduce blowing dust, and use the revenue from leases to help fund future restoration efforts.
- The state's Salton Sea Species Conservation Habitat would cover

More progress has been made toward restoring the Salton Sea in the past year than in the entire decade before.

Last week when Gov. Jerry Brown released his proposed 2016-2017 budget, it included an unprecedented \$80 million for projects at the ailing lake and 17 positions dedicated to Salton Sea work.

A couple of days before, the state water board gathered input on efforts to revive the Salton Sea, which faces environmental devastation from shrinking inflows.

And at Red Hill Bay on the lake's eastern bank, work continues on the first significant rehab project, which will improve bird habitat and quell some of the toxic dust blowing from the exposed shoreline.

The developments at the long-neglected lake are part of what Bruce Wilcox calls "the great awakening."

"The state has recognized its obligations to the Salton Sea," said Wilcox, assistant secretary of Salton Sea policy at the California Natural Resources Agency, a recently created position to which he was appointed by the governor.

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The money “will fund the development of the design for the incremental projects we’ve been talking about, and some of the longer-range plans,” Wilcox said.

Fixing the Salton Sea will take many years and more money, but the governor’s proposed allocation would be a good down payment, said Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit, chairman of the Salton Sea Authority board.

“We made dramatic progress at the Salton Sea last year and the governor’s inclusion of \$80 million to begin work is indicative of that progress,” he said. “This allocation proves that the work to permanently sustain the Salton Sea as a recreational asset, while at the same time protecting the environment, has truly begun.”

The lake in Riverside and Imperial counties has been in a downward spiral since the late 1990s because of water shortages from decreased agricultural runoff, recycling and drought.

As water levels dropped, sediment from the uncovered lakebed was blown across the Coachella and Imperial valleys, threatening the health of residents.

With no outlet except evaporation, the sea has become saltier than the ocean and killed off what was once one of the most productive fisheries in the world. The disappearing food source threatens hundreds of thousands of resident and migratory birds.

Decaying fish and other organic matter stirred by the wind has contributed to the lake’s infamous rotten-egg odor.

Those problems are expected to reach alarming levels after 2017 when an agreement to transfer supplemental water to the lake expires. After the agreement was reached in 2003 – part of a farm-to-city water transfer – the state promised to pay for part of the lake fix. But that never happened.



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