

Salton Sea Authority

Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee
Report to the Salton Sea Authority Board
June 24, 2004

In February 2004, the Salton Sea Authority appointed an Outdoor Recreation Advisory Task Force to evaluate recreational potential of a restored Salton Sea and present recommendations to the board.

With water transfers and the QSA resulting in a smaller sea, the Task Force was asked to address how to turn potential problems into potential opportunities. It was asked to create a new vision for the Sea that responds to the new water realities.

Its members have included: John Benson, Victor Torres, Lea Anne O'Malley, Shirley Palmer, Christine Harris, Sue Giller, Bill Gates, Tim Kelley, Cliff Lawrence, Leon Lesicka, Roland Gaebert, Chris Schoneman, Jack Crayon, Vince Signorotti, Wayne Olesh, Jacob Ward, Fred Singh, Al Kalin, Jack Hart and Tom Raftican.

Lea Anne O'Malley was appointed chairwoman.

The Task Force held its first meeting in March 29. Six subsequent meetings have been held in West Shores (Salton City), Niland, Westmorland, Brawley and Calipatria.

A VISION FOR THE SEA

The Task Force has found that the future for the Salton Sea can indeed be a bright one, even with diminished inflows. The Salton Sea will no longer be California's largest Lake, but, what is lost in quantity will be replaced by quality. For years, dreamers have envisioned economic development and a recreational Mecca around its shores. With proper funding and with the necessary political will at the Federal, State and local government levels, this lake will realize its potential.

Just visualize what can occur if this effort is successful.

In the next several decades, as inflows diminish and the shoreline recedes, new wetlands areas, shallow water ponds and Imperial County's largest fresh water lake will appear along the southern shores. Hunting and fishing, bird watching, hiking, equestrian trails and off roading will attract thousands of visitors and local residents annually. The old Salton Sea Navy Base will possibly become another Glamis—a Glamis with a lake view.

In the northern marine lake, a stabilized body of water will attract sports fishermen and recreational boating. The Imperial County communities of West Shores, Bombay Beach, Calipatria and Niland will receive major economic benefits and development from this renewed ecotourism. The community of North Shore will again become a place to visit.

ISSUES EVALUATED

In analyzing the issues, the Task Force identified several broad categories, with specific questions to evaluate in each category. The questions are cited below.

EXTENSION OF NEW/ALAMO RIVERS AND WETLAND CREATION

A. Should 2,000 to 4,000 acres of wetlands be created in the New and Alamo Rivers and their extensions under the Restoration Plan?

B. Should small, sedimentation basins be designed throughout the River systems or medium sized to large ones be placed in a few locations?

C. Should the design of wetlands in the extensions be much different than the design of wetlands in existing river courses?

FRESHWATER LAKES

A. Should the Restoration Plan include a large freshwater lake fed by Alamo River water at Red Hill Marina?

B. Should the Restoration Plan include a small ski lake fed by Alamo River water around Mullet Island?

C. Should a lake be designated as being specifically for bird watching (with no power boats allowed)?

D. Should there be a channel/lake in Bombay Beach area?

MARINE LAKE NORTH BASIN

A. Are there features of the marine lake in the North part of the Sea that should be added or changed to encourage different forms of recreation?

SHALLOW WATER PONDS

A. Should trails or other public access be provided to the network of shallow water wetlands?

B. What sort of public uses should be allowed in the shallow water ponds?

AGRICULTURE

A. Should land previously flooded by the Sea be reclaimed for farming?

GEOTHERMAL

A. What are the most compatible uses of land near potential geothermal expansion areas?

OFF ROAD VEHICLE USE

A. Can some lands be utilized for off road vehicle use?

B. Should a large (10,000 acre) off road racing course be developed?

OWNERSHIP

- A. Are there special considerations for lands under the jurisdiction of USFWS?
- B. Are there special considerations for lands under the jurisdiction of State Parks?
- C. Are there special considerations for lands under the jurisdiction of IID?
- D. Are there special considerations for lands under the jurisdiction of Bureau of Reclamation?
- E. Are there special considerations for lands under the jurisdiction of the Torres Martinez Tribe?
- F. Are there special considerations for lands under the jurisdiction of other agencies?

HUNTING AND FISHING

- A. Are there special design considerations to maximize hunting opportunities?
- B. Are there special design considerations to maximize fishing opportunities?

OTHER ISSUES

- A. Are there other recreational and economic development issues that ought to be included in the plan?
- B. Where will communities along the Salton Sea shores get their water to accommodate the expected growth?
- C. Should there be a road on the dike?

FINDINGS

EXTENSION OF NEW/ALAMO RIVERS AND WETLAND CREATION

The Task Force was in agreement that wetlands should be extended in both rivers—at least 4,000 acres. The Salton Sea Science Office and other experts should determine the questions regarding the size of sedimentation basins. The Task Force also agreed that the current design should be continued.

The Wetlands projects are very important to the restoration of the Sea because of their ecological value to the region. They are a key political selling point in the total restoration effort.

FRESHWATER LAKES

The Task Force extensively evaluated the potential of freshwater lakes fed by the Alamo and New rivers and is in agreement that such lakes are crucial to expanded recreation use for the Sea.

Members also expressed concern that allowances be made on the lakes for recreational boating as well as restricted areas for wildlife preservation and bird nesting. It was felt that it will be difficult in advance to determine the location of the best wildlife areas: that will be determined by the wildlife. However, it was also felt this could be a seasonal situation and could be controlled by posting—similar to procedures used at Lake Perris.

The committee felt a small recreational freshwater lake near Bombay Beach could not be economically justified. However, the Task Force also said a channel linking Bombay

Beach to the northern lake would be important to serve residents there to prevent that community from becoming totally isolated from access to the new Salton Sea

Two different concepts for a single freshwater lake of up to 2,000 acres were discussed for the region around the current Red Hill Marina. It would be the largest freshwater lake in Imperial County. Both concepts would have an extended channel running north to the main body of the northern lake—a drop of about eight feet over 15 miles. Additionally, dredging would probably be necessary to create the freshwater lake.

The first concept is a kidney-shaped body of water centered around Red Hill with an extended narrow channel running north to Bombay Beach. With this concept, there would be an option to continue Mullet Island as an island, but would leave much of the current wildlife refuge in a “dry” area.

The second concept is a longer and narrower lake that stretches from Obsidian Butte to Red Hill. It incorporates much of the current refuge. Additionally, Obsidian Butte and Red Hill are the only natural structures (“mountain peaks”) for miles—incorporating them in the lake would add some beauty to the area. It also has a narrow channel extending to Bombay Beach. Mullet Island would become part of the dry area in this concept.

More evaluation is necessary on either concept, but the majority of the committee favored the “longer-narrow” option because it incorporates the current refuge area as well as the two “mountain peaks.” However, the Fish and Wild Service expressed reservations regarding use of the refuge area and those must be considered.

MARINE LAKE NORTH BASIN

The committee felt there would be many recreational opportunities in the northern marine lake, which will become very important as the region develops. It was also felt that a public access road across the dike dividing the North Sea and the salt settling pond would be a very valuable asset. The road could have turn-outs for parking and some extensions or piers to enhance fishing in the area.

SHALLOW WATER PONDS

The Task Force felt a series of shallow water ponds around the southern portion of the current sea would be an excellent mitigation for the smaller sea. They not only would become excellent habitat for birds and other wildlife but also would offer extensive recreational opportunities.

Hiking and equestrian trails should be incorporated in the restoration plans as well as bike trails and a cultural component that will provide public education opportunities.

AGRICULTURE

The Task Force thoroughly discussed whether land previously flooded by the Sea on its south end should be reclaimed for farming. The committee decided this is not a good option: shallow ponds are the best alternative.

Questions were raised over water availability to reclaim the land as well as whether the reclamation would be economically feasible.

GEOHERMAL

Portions of the Salton Sea Geothermal Anomaly that are currently underwater have high commercial potential in future years.

This potential expansion of the geothermal fields near Red Hill needs to be coordinated with the ultimate design of a freshwater lake there.

Although the market and economics will dictate expansion of the fields by Cal Energy, some of the hottest areas are under water in that area of the Sea.

Because of the prime Geothermal “hotspots” in the areas of the proposed freshwater lakes, it may be necessary to move the lakes somewhat to the east and north. If that means loss of one of the scenic “mountain peaks” in the lake (Red Hill and Obsidian Butte) another could possibly be constructed. While geothermal development is compatible with recreational uses, it is not compatible with residential areas--such as mobile home parks or camp grounds that could develop near a lake.

Close coordination will be imperative between Cal Energy and the Salton Sea Authority regarding appropriate placement of the lake to maximize the recreation/wildlife potential and not adversely impact potential geothermal development.

OFF ROAD VEHICLE USE

There are areas along the West Shore near the former Navy Test Base that could become excellent off road recreational areas. However, the Task Force had some concerns regarding development of an off road race track.

A Task Force member discussed this with some off road vehicle retailers in Imperial County to get opinions. The consensus was an off road area would serve people very well, but having an actual race track there would be difficult. Such tracks get very heavy use and require extreme amounts of maintenance, including mixing soils. The only way a track could possibly succeed would be one constructed and operated by private enterprise.

An alternative to a race track would be development of a recreational vehicle “parking area”, similar to Glamis. With the Sea as a back drop, it would become a popular recreational site. Families could use the dike for fishing, etc. and have off road access all the way to popular areas near the Ocotillo Wells Recreation area and Plaster City. Fees could be assessed for use of this area.

LAND OWNERSHIP ISSUES

United States Fish and Wildlife Service: There would be a need for land swaps in the hyper saline areas to resolve management conflicts.

State Parks: There were no issues identified. The new features of the Salton Sea that are being discussed are compatible with the State Parks goals.

Imperial Irrigation District: Cal Energy’s use of land under the Sea is also an IID issue. IID will be sensitive to land use and liability issues that effect the land it owns in and around the current Sea.

Bureau of Reclamation: There were no special ownership issues identified regarding Bureau of Reclamation Land.

Torres Martinez: There are some restrictions regarding use of Indian Lands. These would have to be identified by the Torres Martinez Tribe and incorporated into the planning.

County of Imperial: Red Hill Marina is currently a county park. The county will need to be involved in any planning regarding a freshwater lake in that area.

HUNTING AND FISHING

This committee feels strongly that hunting and fishing needs should be factored in to any restoration plan and should be maximized. Wetlands, shallow water ponds and lakes under discussion are designed to enhance recreational opportunities. It is agreed that certain areas may be designed for specific uses in an effort to balance recreational uses with environmental concerns. As budgets are put together, sufficient funds should be requested to cover operations and maintenance to maximize the hunting and fishing potential.

In addition to hunting and fishing, other areas should be set aside for bird watching, hiking, bicycling, equestrian and other compatible uses.

OTHER ISSUES

Regional Cooperation between Economic Development agencies and organizations in Coachella and Imperial Valleys: It is imperative that economic development interests in the Coachella and Imperial valleys work together to realize the vision and potential of a restored Salton Sea. It is also imperative that this region work cooperatively with representatives and agencies at the federal and state level and that they, in turn, give substantial value to local input.

Agricultural Issues: The Salton Sea serves as a model of how the interrelationship between agricultural needs and environmental, recreational and economic benefits create a valuable ecosystem. The committee wants to recognize the significance agriculture plays in creating this valuable resource and does not want to agriculture's contributions diminished.

Budget Issues: State and local budget reductions will have an impact on development and management of recreational areas at a restored Salton Sea. However, this is considered to be a short term problem. While there are few agency resources at present, thought should be given to develop strong volunteer programs to assist in development and management of hunting and fishing areas.

Water to Salton Communities: While there were no specific recommendations, the committee discussed the need to develop a reliable water supply to the West Shores communities that will be needed if they are to develop.

Road on Dike? The committee felt a public access road across the dike would be an excellent idea. It could be a source of possible income and a major economic benefit to the region. It also would enhance recreational access to the Sea. Costs permitting, pullouts for parking and fishing off the dike could be designed into the roadway. Access roads should also be designed to the shallow water lakes without adversely affecting sensitive areas.

Enterprise Zone: The committee recognized the need for an expanded Enterprise Zone in the southern portion of the Sea that is currently being sought by the cities of Calipatria, Brawley and Westmorland. Any Enterprise Zone endeavors must be compatible with environmental and recreational development in the area.