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## Salton Sea geothermal energy plant sensible complement to power needs

The Desert Sun  
August 4, 2005

With Congress' passage last week of the Energy Bill, CalEnergy Corp. hopes to build the country's largest geothermal facility, a 215-megawatt power plant with the first energy flowing to homes and businesses in 2007. A new tax credit in the bill finally makes geothermal energy production competitive with natural gas and coal-burning power.



Desert Sun File Photo

The Salton Sea could soon be home to the nation's largest geothermal power plant.

We hope CalEnergy ultimately pursues the project.

### Multiple benefits

Geothermal is a renewable energy source made possible by the same tectonic activity that causes local earthquakes and the rising of the Rocky Mountains. Rock heated by magma deep below the surface boils water trapped in underground reservoirs. We already enjoy some of this activity via natural hot springs. At geothermal power plants, this hot water is piped to the surface then spun in turbines to produce electricity. It's also a proven, relatively clean energy source. More than 30 nations sitting in earthquake and volcanic zones have extensively used geothermal power for decades.

CalEnergy's project would be a boon to the area. It offers more than enough power to meet the demands of the growing Coachella Valley, which some officials predict will triple to more than 1.1 million residents by 2066. Indeed, geothermal power could yield the output of 10 nuclear plants - but without the nasty radioactive waste. That means the region might become an exporter of energy. Further, it reduces our over-reliance on natural gas as the primary source for generating electricity, ensuring at least stable if not less expensive electric bills.

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### New challenges

While the benefits are great, should the plant go online there, area officials face several new challenges. None of these necessarily outweigh the advantages of a new plant, but if not addressed up front, they will reduce quality of life in the long run:

**Environment and aesthetics:** The Salton Sea serves as a major recreational area and is an environmentally sensitive area. Power plants aren't the prettiest backdrop and take away space from flora and fauna. There is enough room for power generation, recreation and protected natural areas on the sea, but the right balance needs to be found. To that end, geothermal power production ought to be incorporated in the plan to revitalize the Salton Sea.

**Ownership:** Who owns Salton Sea rights to develop the potential energy? Besides power, geothermal plants often supply other environmentally sound benefits such as mineral harvesting. How much of a role will this play in CalEnergy's facility?

**Regional power:** While CalEnergy has signed a long-term contract to supply the Imperial Irrigation District with electricity, that still doesn't necessarily mean lower energy costs for residents and businesses in the West Valley. That depends on whether Southern California

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Edison buys electricity from CalEnergy. If SoCalEdison fails to do so, does this new, cheaper power source create a need for a regional, publicly owned power authority, with the ability to import and export power?

**East valley growth:** The result of a stable and relatively inexpensive electrical power for the Imperial Irrigation District likely will be accelerated development in the east valley and around the Salton Sea. Are those communities prepared for the phenomenal growth that likely will occur there should the power plant go online? It's now up to local residents and officials in those areas to take into account rapid urbanization and develop a long-range vision then adopt the appropriate zoning.

Whatever the answer is to any of these questions, valley officials should push to discover them and to take advantage of this new power source. Our elected officials should be champions of this development for its economic potential and its environmental advantages. Power has been an issue in Southern California for many years, and it's long past time to find environmentally sound solutions.

### THE ISSUE

CalEnergy Corp. may construct the country's largest geothermal power plant on the Salton Sea.

### WE SUGGEST

CalEnergy's pursuit of this project would benefit the Coachella Valley but provides challenges that local officials must tackle.

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What issues need to be addressed if CalEnergy decides to construct a geothermal plant? Send comments to [letters@thedesertsun.com](mailto:letters@thedesertsun.com)

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