

The Need for Restoring the Salton Sea

Some scientists have referred to the Salton Sea as, "California's crown jewel of avian biodiversity." Full of rich and abundant life, the Salton Sea hosts hundreds of species of birds that reside in, or visit, the sea and is one of the most productive fisheries in the world. As California's largest inland body of water, the Salton Sea is a critical natural resource and an important recreation area for the people of the Imperial and Coachella Valleys. The Salton Sea, however, is at risk. Salinity is increasing, threatening the fish that inhabit the Sea, and the birds that depend on them for food. Furthermore, if action is not taken, air quality in the region will be seriously diminished. Ignoring the problems of the Salton Sea and allowing it to become an environmental disaster is really not an option. We have a great challenge ahead of us to preserve and revitalize this important resource, and my commitment to that process has never waned.

Covering a surface area of 376 square miles of the southeastern corner of California, the Salton Sea's desert location allows for minimal inflow from rain. Ninety percent of the entire inflow to the lake is agricultural runoff from the Imperial, Coachella, and Mexicali Valleys. Although this inflow carries nutrients, such as phosphates and nitrates, which support the Sea, it also carries an abundance of salt. It has been estimated that the Salton Sea has 10-15 years of life before it becomes a dead sea. The clock is ticking on this great body of water and action needs to be taken quickly to reverse the salinity.

As dire as the situation is for wildlife, allowing the sea to decline could have detrimental effects on human life as well. If the sea were to evaporate, countless residents of Southern California could experience a drastic decline in air quality from what would become a dusty and potentially toxic seabed vulnerable to scattering winds. Reduced inflows to the Salton Sea will expose thousands of acres of lakebed over the coming years, which could send unhealthy amounts of carcinogens into the atmosphere. In fact, dust storms could release selenium, cadmium, and arsenic into the surrounding air basin, potentially causing adverse health impacts for local residents, who already experience the worst air quality in California.

We should look to Owens Lake as an example, which was



drained to quench the thirst of a water hungry and growing Los Angeles. It is now considered the dustiest place in the U.S. To date, Los Angeles has spent about \$250 million to control 19 square miles. The final plan will address 29 square miles at \$415 million for construction and \$10 million a year in operation costs. By comparison, we could be looking at 100 square miles of exposed Salton Sea bed. While I realize not all of that will be emissive, even if half of it is, that is an expensive proposition. This is just the financial costs, never mind that

Owens Lake is not near a heavily concentrated population center like the Salton Sea is.

Theodore D. Schade, a registered professional civil engineer and the Senior Project Manager for the Great Basin Air Pollution Control District in Bishop, California, testified recently at a Congressional Field Hearing I hosted in Palm Desert to the similarity of the Owens Lake catastrophe and the potential danger to the Salton Sea. After having spent thirteen years studying dust emissions from the dried beds of Owens and Mono Lakes in Eastern California and helping to develop and implement plans to reduce those emissions to the required levels, he stated that the air quality problems caused by the diversion of water from the Salton Sea could potentially be worse than the Owens Lake case. "Everyone involved with the Salton Sea needs to admit that they could be involved in creating an enormous environmental catastrophe and commit the time and money necessary to determine the magnitude of the problem and implement the necessary solutions," Schade stated.

Restoring the Salton Sea and stopping this dramatic threat to Southern California's air takes a strong commitment on the federal, state and local level. Simply finding the money within a cash starved state and stretching further an already tight budget in Washington, D.C., presents a challenge. Recently, we have been pleased to find a surge of interest and recognition of the Sea's challenges, but much work still needs to be done to find the money and convince different regions to support our efforts.

On a federal level, I am pleased by what work has been done to sustain the Sea and protect the region. In 1998, Congress passed the Salton Sea Reclamation Act (Public Law 105-372).

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