



# SAVING THE SALTON SEA: WE CAN'T AFFORD TO WAIT

If action is not taken to restore the Salton Sea after mitigation water flows end in 2017, there will be rapid and catastrophic consequences for humans and the environment. And an eleventh-hour deal won't cut it; new infrastructure and regulatory systems must be built as soon as possible in order to be ready to step in as soon as the water flows cease. **Time is of the essence.**

For some time, the Salton Sea has been shrinking due to a variety of factors. The lake's retreat is resulting in fine dust from exposed lake bed, called playa, being swept up by wind and carried into the air, wreaking havoc on surrounding populations already choked by some of the worst air in the nation and plagued by endemic respiratory illnesses.

To make matters worse, the Salton Sea is a terminal lake, which means 100 years of irrigation runoff has dumped tons of pesticides, fertilizer, and industrial pollutants into the lake without any outlet. As the water level drops, the lake will become significantly saltier at a disastrously rapid rate, leading to ecological collapse.

Human populations aren't the only species which will feel the effects: As the lake recedes, rising water salinity will make the lake increasingly uninhabitable for fish and the over 400 species of birds who depend on the Sea. The Salton Sea has become more and more important for birds as over 90% of wetlands across California have been destroyed—the most in the nation. The Salton Sea is especially important in its position as a key rest stop along the avian migratory route, called the Pacific Flyway.

## THE SALTON SEA CRISIS IS COMING TO A HEAD IN 2017

In 2003, the State of California approved a comprehensive agreement (known as the Quantification Settlement Agreement, or QSA) that addressed a number of water issues in Southern California. Among other actions, it diverted water from agricultural use in the Imperial Valley to San Diego. This was accomplished by fallowing farm fields, and this in turn meant runoff

from these fields would no longer reach the Salton Sea. To offset this loss, the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) was required to provide mitigation flows (from additional fallowing) into the Sea for fifteen years. The mitigation flows will end in 2017, and to date the State has not funded a solution to avert the impending natural disaster.

**“This is life and death for us.** For those of us whose health, lands and wildlife are being destroyed, we have a responsibility to rise up and demand immediate action is taken to save the Salton Sea.”

- Raul Zendejas, Mecca

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

Much like Owens Lake, the biggest natural hazard to air quality in the nation, the exposed Salton Sea playa/lakebed will emit huge amounts of toxic dust. But unlike Owens Lake, the Salton Sea sits in a much warmer and more arid climate. It also is much larger, and has a larger population around it. Without prompt action to address this issue, the Sea will shrink by as much as 20 feet in water-level loss, salinity could triple, and its area could be reduced by up to 100 square miles.

The relatively modest effects of the Salton Sea's shrinkage so far will pale in comparison to the impending humanitarian and ecological calamity of sudden and

extreme consequences of inaction. The stakes are too high not to band together and take action for ourselves, our families and our neighbors.

### Fallout of inaction means:

#### HUMAN HEALTH

- Hospitalization rates for asthma in the region are among the highest in the state. Given well-established connections between air quality and asthma incidence, hospitalization rates from asthma are expected to soar even higher
- Economically disadvantaged will be most severely impacted by these health threats. These are the people for whom management of asthma is most difficult, and consequently hospitalization rates for asthma in the region are among the highest in the state, with emergency room visits more than twice that of California as a whole
- Failure to enact dust control measures could result in public health costs from exposed playa emissions increasing from \$360 million in 2014 to \$1.4 billion in 2025 and to about \$2 billion per year after 2035



#### ECOLOGICAL COLLAPSE

- The Salton Sea is a critical stop on one of four major bird migratory pathways in the western hemisphere, extending from Alaska to Patagonia, with rivers, marshes and other wetlands offering refueling stops for millions of birds that funnel through this transcontinental pathway called the Pacific Flyway.
- Over 90% of California's natural wetlands have dried up or been converted into farm fields and urban areas—more than any other state—and the Salton Sea has become one of Southern California's the last remaining stops on the Pacific Flyway.

- If the Salton Sea becomes too inhospitable, not only would the birds who call the sea home die, but the populations of migratory species would decrease as well.
- The loss of the Salton Sea would decrease the total number of birds that can be supported, and that the remaining birds would have to fly farther without suitable habitat (costing them more energy, which may have been used for reproduction).

#### GEOTHERMAL

- Geothermal at the Sea can help with restoration by reducing the exposed playa, while providing jobs and economic benefits to surrounding communities.
- The Salton Sea area is one of the largest geothermal resources in the United States located at the southern end of the Sea in Imperial County.
- Per the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, at a minimum there is a potential for at least 1,350 MW of new geothermal to be developed at the Salton Sea by 2030.
- This means real jobs and real money to Imperial County, which has 21.5% unemployment.
- Geothermal will help reduce our reliance on fossil fuels that hurt the health of our communities, economy and planet.

#### A CLARION CALL TO ACTION

The state needs to step up now and develop, implement and fund near and short term restoration actions, BEFORE we are victims of a natural disaster. Together we can pressure decision makers to adopt a plan that protects us and our local ecology. It starts with you, though, and here are a few ways you can help the effort:

- Amplify our message and increase awareness by taking to social media
- Attend public meetings
- Send public comments to the State Water Board
- Help us project strength at rallies
- Express your opinion by writing to local editors
- Write to California Natural Resources Secretary Secretary John Laird and tell him that the State of California must step up and save the Salton Sea, by developing, implementing and funding near and short term restoration actions

#### WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

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