

Salton Sea Management: Overview and Update

LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE

Presented to:
Assembly Committee on Water, Parks, and Wildlife
Hon. Eduardo Garcia, Chair



Overview of the Salton Sea



Salton Sea Is State's Largest Lake

- Lake is approximately 35 miles long and up to 15 miles wide.
- Modern lake formed in 1905 from breach in Colorado River irrigation canal. Has been fed in ensuing years by agricultural runoff.
- Lake is extremely saline—approximately 50 percent more than the Pacific Ocean. Lake has no outlet so salts are left behind when water evaporates.



Lake Is Shrinking, Expedited by Water Transfers

- Lake is shrinking and becoming increasingly saline as inflow does not keep pace with evaporation.
- Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA) in 2003 reduced and reallocated Colorado River water, including transferring water from primarily agricultural users in the Imperial Valley to other areas of Southern California. This reduced agricultural runoff into the lake.
- State required some mitigation inflow water to continue to be provided to the lake to maintain stable salinity levels for several years; however, that requirement expired in December 2017.



As Lake Shrinks, Dry Lakebed Is Exposed

- State estimates that an average of 4,800 acres of “playa” will be newly exposed each year over the next ten years.



Why the Salton Sea Matters



Dust and Air Quality Risks

- Airborne particulate matter from the exposed playa—some of which is toxic—presents a significant health hazard and can contribute to respiratory illness in humans. It can also damage agricultural crops and harm wildlife.



Important Migratory Bird Habitat

- Lake is a critical stop-off on the Pacific Flyway. Loss of historic wetlands throughout the Central Valley leaves migrating birds few other alternatives. Protecting against extreme salinity in the lake is important for survival of the fish that provide food for these birds.
- Lake and surroundings also provide habitat for some at-risk fish and bird species.



Key Component of Past and Future Colorado River Agreements

- Mitigation and restoration activities are an important contingency for Colorado River water allocation decisions.



Regional Importance

- State of the lake affects the regional economy, housing market, agricultural productivity, residential quality of life, and recreation opportunities.



State Responsibilities and Management Activities



State Committed to Mitigating Effects of Water Transfers

- As a component of the QSA, the state agreed to pay most of the costs to respond to the impacts from the water transfers and resulting loss of agricultural runoff into the lake. Portions of the QSA were codified in state law.
- In 2016, California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) entered into Memorandum of Understanding with federal government that state will take lead role in cooperative effort to implement habitat and dust suppression projects.



State Has Prepared and Is Beginning to Implement Management Plan With Annual Goals

- In March 2017, CNRA published plan for Phase I of Salton Sea Management Program. Plan sets annual milestones for acres of habitat restoration and dust-suppression projects over the next ten years.
- Proposes to construct 500 acres of projects by December 2018, and 29,800 acres by 2028.
- State Water Resources Control Board recently adopted order to guide implementation of the plan, including its annual acreage goals. The order also included a requirement that at least half of the acres of the projects constructed each year provide habitat benefits for fish and wildlife.



Funding for Salton Sea Management Activities

Funding Available for Salton Sea Mitigation and Restoration			
(In Millions)			
Source	Authorized	Unspent	Use
State			
Proposition 12 (2000)	\$4.8	\$4.8	Constructing Species Conservation Habitat (SCH) project.
Proposition 50 (2002)	33.6 ^a	9.8	Environmental Impact Report and related studies and planning activities; SCH project.
Proposition 84 (2006)	47.0	23.4	Staffing and planning activities; SCH project planning and design; "Financial Assistance Program" projects including Red Hill Bay, Seawater Marine Habitat Pilot, and Torres-Martinez Wetlands.
Federal			
NRCS (to Salton Sea Authority) ^b	\$7.5	\$7.5	Agricultural dust suppression and wetlands projects.
NRCS (to state)	0.8	0.8	Planning activities.
Local			
QSA Joint Powers Authority	\$288.0 ^c	\$130.5	Various mitigation requirements associated with the QSA.
Salton Sea Restoration Limit ^d	68.5	53.5	Various restoration activities.
Totals	\$450.0	\$230.0	

^a The bond authorized \$58.6 million for various purposes in the Colorado River basin, of which \$33.6 million has been allocated specifically for activities at the Salton Sea.

^b The Salton Sea Authority is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) of local stakeholder groups including the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla tribe, two water agencies, and two county governments.

^c The QSA JPA consists of three water districts: the Imperial Irrigation District, the Coachella Valley Water District, and the San Diego County Water Authority. These agencies agreed to pay \$133 million in 2003 dollars. The current estimate for the ultimate amount of this commitment (with interest and inflation) is \$288 million.

^d This consists of payments made by the three water agencies that make up the QSA JPA for the state to conduct restoration activities in the region. As part of the QSA, the agencies agreed to pay \$30 million in 2003 dollars. Two agencies made lump-sum payments; one agency is paying its share over time and still owes \$43 million including interest.

NRCS = National Resources Conservation Service and QSA = Quantification Settlement Agreement.



Funding for Salton Sea Management Activities

(Continued)

- \$450 Million Has Been Authorized for Planning, Mitigation, and Restoration Activities**

- Management Plan Establishes Ten-Year Goals, Associated Costs of Around \$400 Million**
 - \$80 million from Proposition 1 (2014) is available for meeting these goals.

- Funding for Full Implementation of Plan Still Uncertain**
 - Proposition 68 (on June 2018 ballot) would provide an additional \$200 million.
 - November 2018 ballot proposition would provide an additional \$200 million.
 - State is pursuing additional federal funding.