



May 17, 2018

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kamala Harris
United States Senate
112 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Feinstein and Senator Harris:


We are writing to convey our strong support for the Farm Bill conservation title of H.R. 2, which was recently favorably reported out of the House Committee on Agriculture and is awaiting consideration by the full House of Representatives. We worked to help secure H.R. 2's very significant increases in mandatory conservation funding and modifications to policy tools that would not only enable us to holistically address Salton Sea conservation, but would also broadly benefit California. We ask that you work to secure the inclusion of these provisions in the Senate companion bill and in the final Farm Bill.

In particular, the roughly \$3.7 billion annual increased investment in flexible funding tools provided in H.R. 2 would enable us to expand planned and ongoing U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Sea pilot projects, tribal wetlands restoration projects, Sea air quality and habitat restoration projects, and the development of deep water habitat at the Sea's northern end. It would provide the critical funding match to California's Salton Sea Management Program (SSMP) investments and advance the Federal government's yet-to-be fulfilled Sea funding commitments.

The Salton Sea is a shallow, saline terminal lake located in Imperial and Riverside counties. The Sea is California's largest lake, and over 400 bird species are estimated to rely upon it, including threatened and endangered species. Since the early 2000s inflows to the Sea have been decreasing, exposing the Sea's lakebed or playa, and resulting in significant negative habitat and air quality impacts. The Sea receives the majority of its inflows from the Colorado River after serving two major agricultural areas managed by Imperial Irrigation District (IID), the largest irrigation district in the nation, and the Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD). Together these two irrigation districts serve roughly 700,000 acres of prime agricultural land, producing a substantial portion of this nation's winter fruits and vegetables.

The Federal government is a major Sea landowner and is legally obligated to ensure that dust emissions from its exposed playa lands meet environmental requirements. The area does not meet air quality standards and has the highest rate of childhood asthma in California.

Recognizing the national significance of the Salton Sea and its close tie to agriculture, in 2016 USDA approved the Salton Sea Regional Conservation Partnership Program (Sea RCPP), which is comprised of the major stakeholders, including the Salton Sea Authority (SSA), California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA), IID, Imperial Valley Vegetable Growers, Imperial County Farm Bureau,

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and the University of California. In 2017, USDA approved the CNRA Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention (Watershed Act) pilot project to expand RCPP work directly to the Sea playa. Both of these efforts are focused at the Sea's southern end.

Together these efforts have demonstrated the problems and promise of applying Farm Bill conservation programs to the challenges at the Salton Sea. In particular, through our work together we identified the need to modify these programs to more broadly authorize the expenditure of funding directly on the irrigation district playa lands which are or will be exposed, and to expand the amount of mandatory funding in these programs so that we may effectively address the conservation challenges at both the southern and northern ends of the Sea.

H.R. 2 contains these much needed modifications. In particular, H.R. 2's reallocation of substantial mandatory funding and associated policy changes to RCPP, the Watershed Act, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) would enable our coalition to compete for roughly \$3.7 billion in annual mandatory funding to expand our Sea work.

Under current law, our coalition is largely limited to competing for roughly \$150 million in annual appropriated funding for our efforts. This is because current law restricts the vast majority of the \$6 billion in annual Farm Bill conservation program funding to private agricultural lands. While the main Sea conservation challenges exist on agricultural lands and adjacent lands, many of these lands are in public irrigation district ownership. The current \$150 million in USDA funding allocated to programs which may be applied to such lands is not sufficient to meet the scale the challenge at the Sea, nor to fully address the Federal government's legal responsibilities. Overall, the limitations in current law shortchange not only our Sea efforts, but also growers throughout California.

H.R. 2 would correct this problem, doubling funding for EQIP to \$3 billion annually, while authorizing irrigation districts like IID and CVWD to hold contracts and apply funding to irrigation district lands. This would enable the application of funding directly to the area of greatest need, the Sea's playa, expanding the reach of the existing RCPP and Watershed Act pilots, as well as IID, Interior Department and CNRA projects. H.R. 2's increase in ACEP funding would enable SSA and the Torres Martinez Tribe to expand its wetlands restoration work, which recently completed its first phase. The provision of mandatory funding for the Watershed Act would enable the development of deep water habitat work at the Sea's northern end. H.R. 2's provisions to enable RCPP partnerships like ours to renew or expand project agreements, and to use the Watershed Act authorities more broadly, are also important changes which would facilitate our work.

Notably, all these changes would also greatly assist growers and irrigation districts throughout California expand their RCPP agreements, meet new State groundwater conservation mandates, water quality requirements, and comply with threatened and endangered species protections.

As you work on the Senate Farm Bill, in addition to including these House provisions, we recommend you modify the underlying planning requirements in the Watershed Act to authorize other Federal agencies to accept USDA plans as sufficient for their own requirements. CNRA's Watershed Act pilot requires the preparation of a Watershed Plan. We are coordinating the preparation of this plan with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) with the goal that this USDA plan would also satisfy Corps feasibility study requirements, thereby facilitating future Corps investment at the Sea. Congressional authorization enabling the streamlining of federal agency planning would facilitate this effort and expedite our work.

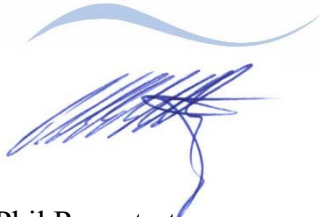
The California Water Bond to be voted on in June 2018 contains another \$200 million for the Sea. Overall, CNRA's SSMP 10-year plan calls for 30,000 acres of habitat and air quality work at the Salton Sea, with an estimated cost of roughly \$400 million. The funding increases and modifications to Farm Bill conservation programs contained in H.R. 2 could easily provide enough assured federal funding match necessary to accomplish the SSMP 10-year plan, and avoid the estimated \$70 billion in agricultural, public health, ecological, cultural and economic costs of inaction at the Salton Sea.

We thank you for your work to advance these efforts at the Salton Sea.

Sincerely,



Salton Sea Authority



Phil Rosentrater
GM/Executive Director
Salton Sea Authority



Bruce Wilcox
Assistant Secretary – Salton Sea Policy
California Natural Resources Agency

cc:

- The Honorable Raul Ruiz (D-CA)
- The Honorable Juan Vargas (D-CA)
- The Honorable Mike Conaway (R-TX), Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture
- The Honorable Collin Peterson (D-MN), Ranking Member, House Committee on Agriculture



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. M. Barrett".

J. M. Barrett
General Manager
Coachella Valley Water District

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Patrick O'Dowd".

G. Patrick O'Dowd, Director
Division 1
Coachella Valley Water District

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cástulo R. Estrada".

Cástulo R. Estrada, Director
Division 5
Coachella Valley Water District



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James C. Hanks
Director, Division 3
Imperial Irrigation District

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Erik J. Ortega
Director, Division 4
Imperial Irrigation District



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ryan Kelley".

Ryan Kelley, Supervisor
Supervisor, District 4
Imperial County

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John R. Renison".

John Renison
Supervisor, District 1
County of Imperial



Thomas

Thomas Torte, Chairman/SSA Director member
Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla

Alfrena Santillanes

Alfrena Santillanes, Secretary/SSA Director member
Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla



Marion Ashley

Marion Ashley
Fifth District Supervisor
Riverside County Board of
Supervisors

V. Manuel Perez

V. Manuel Perez
Supervisor, Fourth District
County of Riverside