

May 7, 2020

The Honorable Eduardo Garcia  
Chairman, Assembly Committee on  
Water, Parks and Wildlife  
State Capitol, Room 4126  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re: AB 3256 (Support in Concept)**

Dear Chairman Garcia:

As the state confronts the aftermath of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic and the unimaginable loss of life and economic devastation left in its wake, we urge you to not lose sight of how the circumstances at the Salton Sea not only contributed to the pandemic's severity and lethality in Riverside and Imperial County, but also how the Sea's further collapse will make the economic devastation magnitudes worse. Now more than ever, it is imperative the state meet its legal and moral obligations to mitigate the impact of the Sea's collapse and enable the economic recovery of the region through funding for shovel-ready projects. To this end, the Salton Sea Authority, a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) consisting of the Coachella Valley Water District, the Imperial Irrigation District, Imperial County, Riverside County and the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians, representing all the regional elected agencies and governments with jurisdiction over the Salton Sea, urges you to incorporate the following framework into your deliberations as you and your colleagues develop legislation to place a recovery bond before voters.

**Investment in the Salton Sea**

Long before the Coronavirus pandemic occurred, the Salton Sea region has been suffering severe health and economic crises – a crisis that is the direct result of legislation and commitments made by the State of California to facilitate the largest agriculture to urban water transfer in the history of the United States. In 2003, under a Federal mandate to reduce its reliance on Colorado River water, the State undertook an intensive mediation effort to bring to settlement several disputing water agencies in southern California. The lynchpin was a water transfer agreement between the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) and the San Diego Water Authority (San Diego), whereby IID would agree to conserve and transfer water to San Diego that would have otherwise gone to the Salton Sea. To facilitate the transfer, the Legislature passed legislation codifying the water transfer, known as the Quantification Settlement Agreement (Stats 2003, Chapters 611, 612, 613), and declaring the commitment of the State of California to undertake the restoration of the Salton Sea ecosystem and the permanent protection of the wildlife dependent on the ecosystem.

In addition, the State executed a memorandum of understanding with the litigating parties, whereby it made itself “unconditionally liable” for mitigating the environmental impacts related to the transfer above the first \$133 million in costs (QSA-MOU Section 4).

We applaud Governor Newsom for including a Salton Sea appropriation as part of his Resiliency Bond proposal in the 2020-2021 State Budget. And while we appreciate the direness of the state’s finances as a result of the pandemic, the reality is that the circumstances at the Salton Sea have been dire for almost twenty years and now is not the time to make them worse. As such, we respectfully request that the recovery bond include a line item allocation for the Salton Sea.

### **Minimum Salton Sea Investment of \$300 Million**

In 2002, the State Water Resources Control Board, anticipating the devastating impact the QSA water transfer would have on the Salton Sea, the Sea’s wildlife, and the communities that surround the Sea, ordered the IID to continue to provide water inflows to the Salton Sea at levels sufficient to maintain the salinity levels that would have existed absent the transfer. The purpose of the delay was to provide the state the time it needed to develop a long-term plan to address the impact of the water transfer and enable the restoration of the Salton Sea. In 2017, after 15 years, not only did the state fail to put forward a viable restoration plan for the Salton Sea, but the SWRCB order expired, setting into motion the rapid collapse of the Salton Sea.

- Over the past two years, the Salton Sea’s surface has dropped by almost two feet, compared to ten feet over the past twenty years.
- From 1999, when the Sea reached a depth similar to when it was first created in 1905, the Sea has receded by roughly the size of San Francisco, or almost 45 square miles.
- Only 3% of the 100 million fish that populated the Sea in 1999 remain today.

The human impact has been just as dramatic. As the sea has receded, it has exposed vast swaths of playa laden with toxic, fine-grained material that has collected on the Sea bottom over the last century. When the wind blows, this dust is kicked into the air, exposing the largely poor and Latino communities surrounding the Sea to dangerous particulates. In some weather events like the Sept 10-13 storm in 2013, South Coast AQMD documented noxious hydrogen sulfide released from subsurface sea sediments blown all the way to the Los Angeles air basin, exposing tens of millions of California citizens to sickening rotten egg aromas. This real world event serves as a dire harbinger of more deadly dust impacts that could impact vast populations of Southern California if the increasing exposure of playa at the Salton Sea is not addressed.

Not surprising, Imperial County suffers the highest rate of asthma-related emergency room visits for children in California and the problem is expected to get much worse. In the context of the pandemic, these circumstances likely increased the severity and lethality of the virus, as several studies, including one by Harvard University, found that exposure to fine particulate pollution increased by 15% the likelihood a person would die from COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States, Harvard School of Public Health, April 5, 2020. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/air-pollution-linked-with-higher-covid-19-death-rates/>

Accordingly, we join members of the Environmental Justice Community in requesting that the bond include a minimum investment of \$300 million to the Salton Sea.


**Local Control**

In 2018, voters overwhelmingly passed Proposition 68, a \$4 billion Parks, Environmental and Water Bond. As part of that bond, voters agreed to provide the Salton Sea Authority with \$30 million dollars for activities that furthered the Salton Sea Management Plan. With representation from all the regional elected agencies and governments with jurisdiction over the Salton Sea, the Salton Sea Authority is uniquely suited to respond to the demands of residents and invest in projects that meet the needs of the entire Salton Sea region. We respectfully request the recovery bond follow the model established in Proposition 68 and make funding directly available to the Salton Sea Authority.

In closing, we understand the desire of legislators to avoid targeting the bond at specific, local projects that benefit a given locality. We believe, however, that the Salton Sea is quantitatively and qualitatively different in that the crisis facing the Sea was a direct result of commitments made by the state and that the state has a legal obligation to uphold.

For these reasons, we respectfully request that you incorporate the above framework into your deliberations as you and your colleagues negotiate legislation to place a Recovery Bond before voters.

Sincerely,



Castulo Estrada  
Chairman



Alex Cardenas  
Vice Chairman