

CALIFORNIA

Salton Sea's death spiral sparks pleas for Congress to help

[Jeremy P. Jacobs](#), E&E News reporter

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California officials pressed Congress yesterday to step up federal efforts to address the rapidly growing public health crisis at the Salton Sea.

Located near the Mexico border, the sea is California's largest lake, covering more than 300 square miles. But the Salton is rapidly drying up due to reduced agricultural runoff, drought, heat and a 2003 water transfer that let San Diego take its water.

"We are committed to meeting our state commitments in the Salton Sea, and our earnest request is for our federal partners to do their part to help meet those collective goals," testified Wade Crowfoot, the secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency.

The receding lake is exposing thousands of acres of a lake bed laced with arsenic and other toxic chemicals that are whipped up in the area's frequent windstorms. Those, in turn, are creating an environmental justice and public crisis among the communities near the lake, which already suffer from elevated asthma rates.

Under the terms of the 2003 water transfer, California had 15 years to come up with a solution to address the lake bed while mitigation water deliveries continued so it wouldn't shrivel too quickly ([Greenwire](#), June 13, 2016).

The state did nothing for years. It wasn't until 2017 — when the mitigation water was cut off — that California released a 10-year, \$383 million plan for the lake.

Crowfoot told a House Natural Resources subcommittee that Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) has made the lake a priority, and the state has provided more than \$345 million in taxpayer funds and bonds for dust suppression and habitat restoration.

But the lake will need a lot more. Crowfoot said remediation will likely take hundreds of millions of dollars.

He pointed out that the federal government — specifically the Bureau of Reclamation — owns a lot of the land in and around the lake bed.

Reclamation has provided about \$600,000 to the sea, Crowfoot said, but mitigation will take a lot more.

Rep. Raul Ruiz (D), who represents part of the area around the lake, was particularly critical of the federal involvement.

"They cannot sit on the sideline and leave my constituents high and dry while the shoreline disappears in front of their eyes," Ruiz said. "My patience is running thin."

Ruiz pointed out that a recent Reclamation budget proposal noted that the agency could be on the hook for more than \$300 million in Clean Air Act obligations as the lake recedes. Reclamation estimates that about 8.75 square miles of its land will be exposed.

"Yet they have presented no plan, no funding request and shown no sense of urgency to do anything about it," Ruiz said.

Water, Oceans and Wildlife Subcommittee Chairman Jared Huffman (D-Calif.) noted that Reclamation was invited to the virtual hearing but didn't attend.

The administration "has chosen to deride our committee" for meeting virtually, he said.

"We prefer to do our work in a way that doesn't make the pandemic worse," Huffman said.

Interior Department spokesman Conner Swanson said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democrats have "clearly demonstrated" that lawmakers and witnesses can "participate in hearings in a safe manner" on Capitol Hill.

"The department," he said in an email, "looks forward to joining hearings when the members of Congress return to work at the committee and do the job the American people sent them to Washington to do."

Those from the area around the Salton implored Congress and the state to act.

Thomas Torte, chairman of the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians, whose reservation is near the sea, said the air pollution is already exacerbating COVID-19 problems among his members.

"This would exponentially attack the population here on the reservation," he said. "We have nowhere to go. This is where our reservation is."

Twitter: [@GreenwireJeremy](#) Email: jjacobs@eenews.net