



# **Salton Sea Authority**

## **Executive Director's Report**

### **To the Board of the Directors**

**June 24, 2021**

#### **Executive Summary**

As we move into the summer months with temperatures routinely hovering above 110°, the Authority and its staff remains active and productive in the pursuit of our mission. Most notable in the current month has been the communication taking place between the State and the Authority, and while there are still great inefficiencies between us, the open line of communications being developed with State representatives has, in my estimation at least, provided a glimmer of hope that a more efficient process for getting things done at and around the Sea is developing. Hope springs eternal.

#### **Leadership and the Spirit of Cooperation**

This month marks the end of President Alex Cardenas' term as President of the Salton Sea Authority Board of Directors. Having first served alongside him as a Director, and in my current role, following his lead as President of the Board, I have come to greatly appreciate his strong but collegial style of leadership. Though recent years would demonstrate otherwise, the Authority has not always had a history of cooperation and collaboration between its members, and the natural tendency of each to retreat into silos is often too hard to avoid. However, it has been my experience in the seven plus months I have served as the Authority's Executive Director that President Cardenas' leadership has been fair and balanced, with equal respect for the issues affecting each member agency, and a deep concern for all the people of the region.

But beyond the sense of fairness that he exhibits in his dealings, I truly came to appreciate the true passion President Cardenas brings to his leadership role. His personal ownership of the success of the organization and a press towards a proper legacy has particularly characterized his tenure. What few know is that nearly every Thursday morning for the past six months President Cardenas and I have spent typically at least an hour, sometimes longer, discussing the wide spectrum of issues affecting the Sea, the region and the people that live here. His attentive yet probative conversations provided great benefit to me in flushing out salient issues of concern and distinguishing those from the unlimited background noise that distracts us all from achieving success.

The interest of every member agency was always at the forefront of the conversation, best characterized as a free flow of ideas where nothing was off limits. And to be sure, we did not always agree! But I knew that in the end I was listened to and the feedback

I received was invaluable to me in developing plans of action to address the affairs of the Authority and meet the needs of the communities that we serve.

As his tenure comes to a close, I thank President Cardenas for his stalwart leadership in this season, and trust that whoever follows in his stead will lead in a like spirit of selfless stewardship.

### **Leaders of Tomorrow**

The Salton Sea Authority has had a long history of working with Colleges and Universities on academic undertakings at the Sea. Libraries are replete with research papers on Salton Sea related studies covering near everything imaginable about the Sea (indeed, likely many things one could hardly imagine). Partnering with institutions of higher learning creates a healthy framework for the training of future generations of leaders who will inherit this and perhaps even larger challenges in a world filled with uncertainties.

Yet the work of the Authority requires focus and intentionality, and with limited resources, it is essential to focus institutional efforts partnering with the Authority towards academic work that can best inform the development of solutions that assist in tackling clearly defined challenges at the Sea. To that end, in recent weeks and months, we have worked with several universities to focus research efforts of mutual benefit.

The thrust of our efforts going forward will be to align ourselves with organizations that can deliver work products that at least stand a chance of being operationalized into current or future phases, or better informs our communications and outreach efforts to the communities and elsewhere. This will also manifest as we move forward to implement a programmatic internship program in the coming months. We expect intern candidates will find great value in an opportunity to gain real life experiences while contributing to an effort of considerable worth.

As outlined in our 2021 – 2022 Business Plan, the implementation of this program is conditioned on securing new monies to cover the costs thereof. To that end, we have recently learned that at least one local university has a program that can provide funding to help realize those opportunities, and we are diligently pursuing its implementation.

### **Local / State / Federal Collaboration**

In December, 2020, through efforts of Congressman Ruiz and assisted by the Authority and its advocacy team, the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2020 Bill was passed into law, which included the following:

**SALTON SEA, CALIFORNIA** – In carrying out the program to implement projects to restore the Salton Sea, California, authorized by section 3032 of the Water Resources Development Act of 2007 (121 Stat. 1113; 130 11 Stat. 1677), the Secretary is authorized to carry out a study for the construction of a perimeter lake, or a northern or southern subset thereof, for the Salton Sea, California.

At present, Congressman Ruiz is actively and aggressively working to secure appropriations necessary for the feasibility study authorized by WRDA. That three-year, \$3 million Study is 50% paid by the Federal government (which would come from the funds appropriated by Congressman Ruiz, if successful), and 50% by the State (or a local sponsor).

The State is in the process of launching into their own long term planning process, with a Water Board mandated deadline to deliver a “long range plan” by December, 2022. The Authority and the State are exploring how the two planning efforts – Federal and State - interrelate, whether or not one would be duplicative to the other, whether the Federal study, to be conducted by the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE), could be informed by the work of the State, and whether the State’s work would possibly be considered an in lieu contribution for the \$1.5 million match. In addition, there is concern that even if the new start authorization is secured in the current year, it would be the end of 2024 at the earliest before the feasibility study would be completed which is two years past the State’s mandated deadline.

On the other hand, with an approved feasibility study in hand, prepared jointly by the USACOE, the State (and presumably the Authority), the project would have access to significant Federal matching funds (up to 65% of total costs) for the implementation of the project deemed feasible by the study. And while the State is doubling - and even tripling-down to make up for lost time in an effort to meet its Water Board mandated deadlines, there is fair skepticism as to whether a fully vetted, properly underwritten long-term plan for the Sea and region can be developed within 18 months. History would suggest otherwise.

It is unknown how this will ultimately play out between the State, the Authority and the Federal family. From the highest levels of this administration, it has been acknowledged that success at the Sea will necessitate a Federal partnership, yet other than work foundationally developed by the Authority and now subsumed by the State, there is little evidence that the State is developing a broad Federal footprint in order to fund a comprehensive revitalization of the Sea. On the other hand, the Authority is working across the Federal family, leaving no stone unturned to identify ample opportunities in pursuit of ultimate success. The State and the Authority can and should work together

in pursuit of this important goal. Recent conversations with the State have provided a glimmer of hope that this scenario could manifest, but only time will tell.

## **Covid Recovery**

The Authority business office is returning to some semblance of normal. To provide proper spacing, staff had been operating with staggered working hours since returning to in-office work. Recently, Riverside County significantly relaxed social distancing restrictions, and we are evaluating how the restoration of workplace order will affect our work rules and office hours. Our goal is to provide maximum effort for the benefit of our members and the region while providing Authority workforce a safe, quality experience.

In a similar manner, for some months we have been considering how the Authority might conduct our monthly meetings in person. We had hoped to come up with a solution for the June meeting, but given the diverse makeup of our Board and the yet unclear requirements for safe gathering efforts to do so were scrapped early in the planning process. We have come to understand that while some member agencies have been meeting in person for months, others have more restrictive standards. And in the instant where meetings have been taking place, strict social distancing rules have been implemented which would make a gathering of a ten-person board - plus staff - plus possibly members of the public difficult, if not impossible. We've investigated venues that might allow for greater spacing between each board member, and between the board members and any member of the public who might wish to attend, but have been unsuccessful in securing such a venue.

Because the Authority's next meeting is not scheduled until September, it is likely that for planning purposes we will begin working with the member agencies on the possibility of an in-person meeting in October, to be announced after our September return. The Governor's Executive Order allowing for virtual meetings in variance to the Brown Act requirements remains in place through the month of September, and we do not know what the Governor or the Legislature might do to extend or modify the order to accommodate less restrictive virtual meetings going forward. However, in an abundance of caution and to plan for the potential expiration of the Executive Order, we will have a plan in place for an in-person gathering of the October Board meeting finalized for Board consideration in September.