



Executive Director's Report To the Board of the Directors April 28, 2022

Taking Inventory

As we approach the end of this fiscal year and consider budget requirements for the next, the opportunity presents itself to assess where we have been and where we are headed. At a recent meeting of the State Water Board, California Natural Resources Agency provided the Water Board an update of progress being made towards meeting the State's mandate at the Sea, based on its annual report issued in February of this year¹. And while the State has made great strides at "catching up" on its requirements under the order, the State remains behind on meeting its originally required benchmark.

This prompted the question, raised by several speakers and presenters (including the Authority), that it may be worthwhile to consider whether the original targets set by the order are achieving the best results for the Sea and region, or whether – without reducing the intensity of effort – it would be worthwhile to reevaluate the criteria used for success. For example, Tina Shields of IID pointed out in her presentation that 10% of the exposed playa contributed to 50% of the airborne contaminants, and that over 80% of the contaminants were produced from less than 25% of the exposed playa. Consideration should be given whether the targets are properly aligned with addressing the risks to human health and safety.

I have attached for your perusal the text of my presentation to the Water Board which discusses this and other items pertinent to the States Annual Report and effort, and will serve as the balance of my report. In summary, we – the State and the Authority – have come a long way in aligning our goals and priorities, creating greater efficiencies and more productive outcomes for the Sea and region. Continuing to explore how we might improve our communication and collaboration in the months and years ahead will undoubtedly contribute to enhanced outcomes for our member agencies and the people we represent and serve.

¹ Report available from: https://saltonsea.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2022-Annual-Report_English_Feb-24-2022_Final.pdf



April 20, 2022

Joaquin Esquivel, Chair
State Water Resources Control Board
1001 "I" Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Local Entities comments - SWRCB Annual Salton Sea Public Workshop

Chair Esquivel, distinguished members of the board,

My name is Patrick O'Dowd and I am the Executive Director for the Salton Sea Authority. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a few brief comments, participating with this panel of local entities. Of course, there are a host of other local entities that are active at and around the Sea, some you have already heard, others you'll hear from later. But the Authority, through its 10 locally elected board members, represents every person in the Imperial and Coachella valleys, in matters of land use, public safety, energy, water, and a host of other issues of local concern. Collectively, since its formation in 1993 the Authority and its member agencies have been diligently pursuing solutions to long known challenges at and around the Sea. And to be sure, the work of the Authority could not advance without the collaborative support of our state and federal partners, working alongside countless stakeholders representing social, environmental, and other interests and concerns.

It's been a long time. Next year the Authority will recognize 30 years since its formation. It also marks the 20th anniversary of the Quantification Settlement Agreement. But finally, things are beginning to happen. Not as soon as anyone would have liked. And not as fast as anyone would desire. But the revitalization of the Sea and region is beginning to happen. The State has in fact been diligently pursuing its obligations under the 10-year plan and is actively formulating a long-range strategy for the Sea and region. We applaud the State and its recent efforts.

Concurrently, the Authority has been advocating for support in Sacramento and DC, both to assist the State in fulfilling its obligations under the transfer agreement, and to facilitate a transition of the Sea and region from what it once was to what it sustainably can be. Again, working in coordination with our extensive local stakeholder groups, the

Authority has advocated for the State administration and the legislature to make the necessary financial commitments to fund work at the Sea. And in recent years that strong, loud, local voice has begun to bear fruit. From the \$80 million in Prop 1 funding, over \$200 million from Prop 68, and the most recent commitments of \$220 million in general fund resources pledged or secured, the State has demonstrated material good faith in meeting its lingering QSA obligations.

And in our nation's capitol, the Authority has long asserted that a federal partnership is essential to ultimately solving the challenges of the region and positioning it for future success. And Congress has increasingly responded to our efforts, convening the first federal hearings to address the crisis at the Sea, and most recently calling upon the Biden administration to develop a federal funding plan to increase federal investment at the Sea.

Moreover, through the Authority's efforts with our congressional delegation, Sea-specific federal legislation has been enacted by Congress to dedicate significant resources to both help the State meet its obligations and, more important, to help the federal government meet its own obligations to our region as a major federal landowner and tribal trustee. Those federal funding tools include several new and modified USDA programs, like the Watershed Act through which the State now has access to a 50/50 federal match for significant parts of its 10-year plan.

Working with our delegation, the Authority also spearheaded the legislative effort to secure a US Army Corps of Engineers Feasibility study in the 2020 Water Resources Development Act. Our distinguished Chair, my understanding is you were engaged in the infancy of this effort to leverage significant Corps funding when you worked for the junior Senator from California. I am happy to report that, finally, after all these many years, this objective will likely be realized. This 3-year, \$3 million Corps study is funded 50/50 between the federal government and the local sponsor and is key to accessing 65% federal funding for the long-range Salton Sea plan. And working with Congress and the Corps, this year we secured the full federal funding required to undertake this study.

Ms. Shield's presentation was very instructive. Indeed, the more work we do at and around the Sea, the more we learn. In this instance, one thing we learned is that fully half of the playa emissions come from about 10% of the exposed area, and only 25% of the exposed area accounts for over 80% of those emissions. As we reach the halfway mark of the 10-year plan implementation, it might be useful to reassess the State's performance metrics to make sure the best public outcomes are being achieved. Without reducing the pace of execution, consideration should be given to whether the State's annual acreage requirements are achieving their desired result. Rather than pursue a dash to meet acreage targets, the data might suggest a different site selection process, directing the work to areas perhaps a bit less convenient or more difficult to access, yet more vital in achieving the overall goals. Ultimately, addressing the problem at its source is essential in providing surety to the people of the region that they are safe.

And regarding the long-range plan, the State is working mightily to meet its year-end deadline, but the Corps feasibility study will require three years to complete, working in large part from the State's efforts to date as a baseline. It is worth considering if the Corps process and the State's long-range planning efforts should be merged and deadlines reevaluated to reflect a more orderly, consolidated process.

Ms. Colio Warren provided highlights of a small project in the community of Desert Shores. Funded through a \$1.25 million grant to the Salton Sea Authority from the Bureau of Reclamation, this community centric investment will begin the process of restoring life to a community long impacted by the changes at the Sea.

Similarly, the Authority, in collaboration with the County of Riverside, is developing the North Lake Pilot Demonstration project, a 154 acre lake in the community of North Shore. In addition to providing habitat and mitigate exposed playa in an affected urban-adjacent area, and not unlike the smaller investment in Desert Shores, this \$19.25 million Prop 68 funded project will begin the process of transformation for these long-neglected communities. Indeed, for far too long the shoreline communities, including Salton City, Bombay Beach, Salton Sea Beach and others most affected by the decline of the Sea have been largely ignored. Time and again they have been promised

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action, yet no visible progress was ever made. Even when the State announced the groundbreaking of its \$200+ million SCH project in late 2020, few in the local communities understood how that project, far removed from their communities, would impact their lives for the better. Seeing tangible work advance within the communities has begun to change that narrative.

And if we can arrest the declines and continue to invest in the future of those communities, while being able to demonstrate convincingly that their health is not at risk, we will truly will have played a vital role in transitioning the Sea and region from what it once was to what it sustainably can be.

Respectfully submitted,

G. Patrick O'Dowd
Executive Director
Salton Sea Authority