

# Updating the US Bureau of Reclamation's Salton Sea Spreadsheet Model (SSAM) for Future Inflow Scenarios

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## Introduction

The Salton Sea is a terminal lake in Riverside and Imperial Counties, California, receiving runoff from Imperial Valley and Coachella Valley watersheds, including runoff from exports originating in the Colorado River basin. Over the past decades, the Sea's water level has been declining, and it has been the subject of various modeling efforts to quantify the decline, assess the resulting environmental impacts, and evaluate various mitigation and conservation efforts.

The US Bureau of Reclamation performed studies in the 1990s and early 2000s with a spreadsheet model called the Salton Sea Accounting Model (SSAM) [1]. SSAM operates under a simple mass balance for the Sea's water and salt on an annual timestep, assuming the Sea is uniformly mixed on that timescale relative to the mass balance terms. A projected hydrology for the major inflows to the Sea is applied, together with (salinity-dependent) evaporation and direct precipitation terms. The mass balance determines the change in volume at each timestep, and the Sea's total volume is simulated for the duration of the projected hydrology. An elevation-area-capacity (EAC) curve derived from Sea bathymetric survey data allows for a singular relationship between the Sea's volume, surface area, and surface elevation.

Another modeling effort called SALSA2 was developed by CH2M Hill and IID in 2018 [2]. The model used a commercial software platform called Goldsim for its development. The basic form of the SALSA2 model is conceptually similar to the SSAM, treating the Sea as a single storage reservoir and using conservation of salt and water mass to drive the model state. The GoldSim framework runs an explicit Monte Carlo approach for uncertainty in projected inflows to produce many separate model traces for future projections. This model also contains implementations of conservation efforts that were not present in the original SSAM model, such as simulating water use for shallow water habitat and exposed playa mitigation. A graphical user interface is exposed that allows for some aspects of the simulation to be modified, but key model inputs such as inflows are hard-coded into the GoldSim modeling files and not able to be modified by the end user.

Starting in the mid-2010s, Tetra Tech began updating the SSAM model to incorporate the latest available hydrological data, bathymetry data [3], and add new features to simulate modern conservation efforts that are either being considered or are currently underway, such as the

Salton Sea Long Range Plan (LRP) concepts [4] or Salton Sea Management Program Phase 1 projects. This updated SSAM model was used in 2022 and 2023 to estimate the net impacts of short-term allocation reductions on key Sea conservation metrics such as salinity and exposed playa area. This document describes the foundations of the model's important components and input datasets.

## Model Hydrology

The Salton Basin is the northern arm of the former Colorado River delta system. Agricultural return flows and drainage from these valleys and parts of the Mexicali Valley, in addition to municipal and industrial discharges in the watershed, feed the major rivers flowing to the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea watershed encompasses an area of approximately 8,000 square miles from San Bernardino County in the north to the Mexicali Valley (Republic of Mexico) to the south.

The principal sources of inflow to the Salton Sea are the Whitewater River to the north (also known as the Coachella Valley Stormwater Channel [CVSC]), the Alamo and New Rivers to the south, and direct return flows from agricultural drains in the Imperial Valley and Coachella Valley. The riverine sources of inflow are recorded by United States Geological Survey (USGS) gage stations situated at the river mouths, with observations dating back to at least 1988.

The Whitewater River (CVSC) is the primary river drainage channel of CVWD. It brings stormwater runoff, agricultural return flows, and municipal and fish farm discharges from the Coachella Valley to the Salton Sea. In the last few years, flows recorded by the Whitewater River USGS gage (USGS Station ID: 10259540) have been less than 50,000 AF/year.

The Alamo River originates approximately two miles south of the International Border with Mexico and flows north and into the Salton Sea. The USGS station that records Alamo River inflows into the Salton Sea is located near this point of discharge into the Sea (USGS Station ID: 10254730). The Alamo River is dominated by agricultural return flows from IID. In recent years, this flow has averaged 560,000 AF/year.

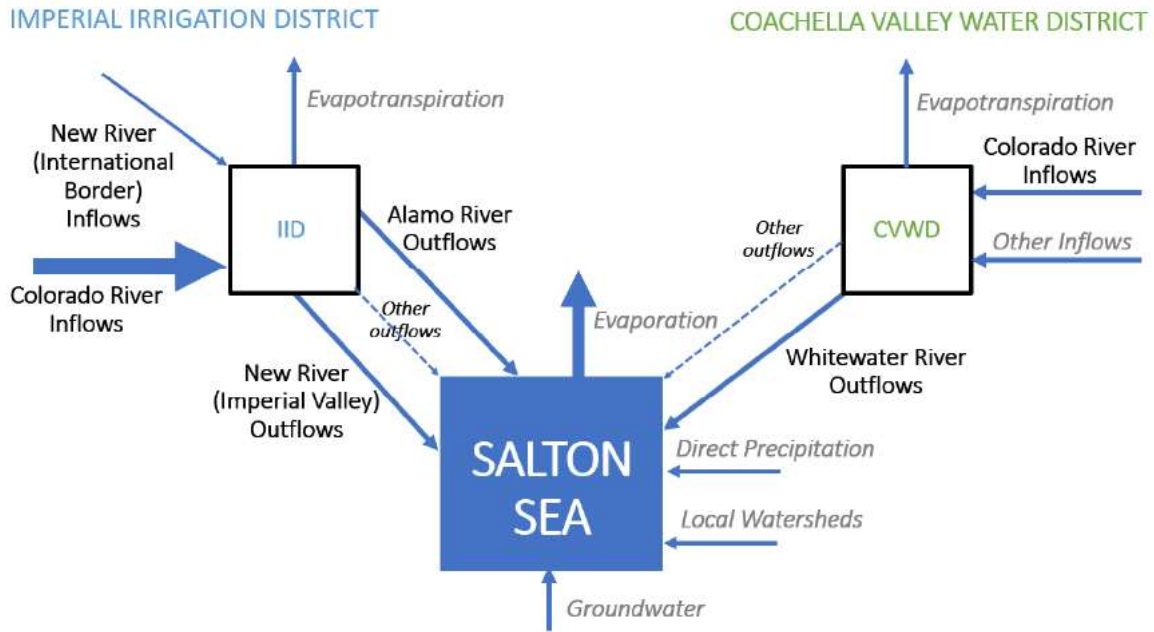
The New River also originates in Mexico. It travels through the Mexicali Valley, crosses the International Border, and flows into the Salton Sea. The New River carries urban runoff, industrial and municipal flows, and agricultural runoff from the Mexicali Valley. There are two USGS gages along the New River. One is in the Imperial Valley, near the mouth of the river at the Salton Sea (USGS Station ID: 10255550). The other is at the International Border (USGS Station ID: 10254970). Since 2018, flows at the New River (Imperial Valley) station have been consistently less than 350,000 AF/year. Flows at the New River (International Border) station have remained stable between 60,000 AF/year and 64,000 AF/year in the same timeframe.

Other outflows to the Salton Sea include a system of agricultural drains in the Imperial Valley, which discharge surface runoff into the Alamo and New Rivers, and agricultural drains in the Coachella Valley.

The agricultural drains in the Imperial Valley introduce approximately 830,000 AF/year of surface runoff to the Alamo and New Rivers.

The relationship between these flows, the Salton Sea, and the IID and CVWD watersheds are illustrated in **Figure 1**. Other losses are from IID and CVWD watershed evapotranspiration (ET)

and evaporation out of the Salton Sea. Other inflows include precipitation, local watershed, and groundwater inflows into the Sea. The unengaged flows (italicized in **Figure 1**) can be estimated by using the reported irrigated acreage and ET rates in the valleys and local weather data that are available for Imperial County, California.



**Figure 1.** Flows into and out of the Imperial Irrigation District (IID), the Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD), and the Salton Sea. Flows that are italicized are unengaged but can be estimated.

**Table 1.** Recent historical inflows, compared to the SALSA2-predicted inflows (units: AF).

Year	Imperial Valley Flow Gaged (1)	Imperial Valley Estimated Ungaged (2)	Mexico Flows (3)	CVSC Gaged (4)	Coachella Valley Drain Flow (5)	Local Watershed (6)	Ground-water (7)	Total Inflow to Sea (8)	Mean SALSA2 Inflow, Low Uncertainty	Mean SALSA2 Inflow, Moderate Uncertainty
2015	885,643	79,708	75,252	42,980	27,779	4,279	11,000	1,127,000	--	--
2016	902,053	81,185	69,562	46,643	33,325	4,425	11,500	1,149,000	--	--
2017	864,193	77,777	68,548	45,730	31,528	4,729	11,800	1,104,000	--	--
2018	837,531	75,378	60,509	44,971	29,779	4,748	12,200	1,065,000	934,000	907,000
2019	810,277	72,925	63,926	52,324	27,359	4,964	12,300	1,044,000	917,000	871,000
2020	817,934	73,614	63,332	51,154	30,350	4,927	12,300	1,054,000	906,000	834,000
2021	856,862	77,118	61,866	46,548	34,172	4,710	12,300	1,094,000	905,000	808,000
AVG 2015-2021	853,000	76,800	66,100	47,200	30,600	4,680	11,900	1,090,000	-	-

***Future Hydrology: Delivery allocations and climate change***

The development of future inflow to the Sea is centered around determining how much the total freshwater inflow may change due to effects of climate change, including basin-wide ET changes for the areas producing the Sea’s runoff, as well as any hypothetical changes to Colorado River water allocations, which make up the majority of Salton Sea inflows.

Long-term Colorado River allocations to Imperial Valley were made by considering the output of the Colorado River Simulation System (CRSS) model, which is used by USBR to provide long-term projections at the Colorado River basin.

On October 5, 2022, California users of Colorado River water released a statement proposing to conserve 400,000 AF of water each year from 2023 to 2026 to contribute towards stabilizing elevations in Lake Mead.<sup>1</sup> IID pledged to cut 250,000 AFY, an amount contingent on federal funding and voluntary participation of water users.<sup>2</sup> Other California users of Colorado River water that signed the statement were the Metropolitan Water District, CVWD, and the Palo Verde Irrigation District. This amount forms the basis for the short-term (2023-2026) inflow reductions considered here, with two different total amounts based on the specific implementation of the reduction:

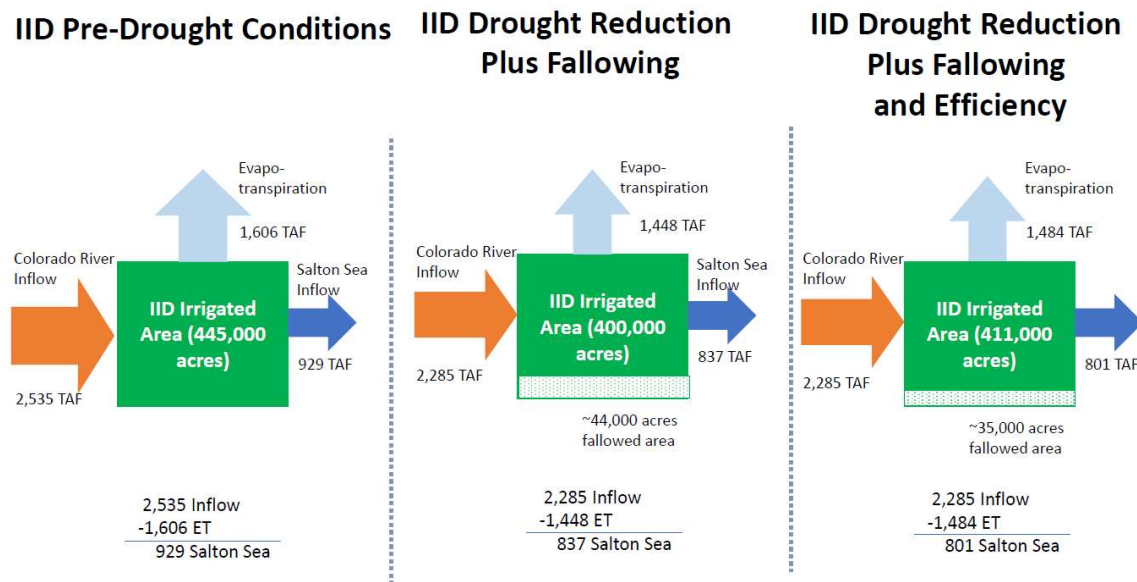
<sup>1</sup> <http://crb.ca.gov/2022/10/california-water-agencies-pledge-to-conserve-additional-water-to-stabilize-the-colorado-river-basin/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://calmatters.org/environment/2022/10/california-colorado-river-water/>

- Following conservation program
- Hybrid conservation program (50 TAFY efficiency and 200 TAFY following)

Based on a review of records over the past 5 years, the following effect represents a 35.7% loss to the Sea, derived from the fraction of Salton Sea inflow compared to Colorado River water supply to IID.

CVWD suggested using delivery reductions of 25 TAFY (10% of inflow reduction to IID). The reduction would be achieved through voluntary Colorado River Water Conservation Program up to 10 TAFY. Average return flows to drains are 20%, so the maximum potential reduction in flows to Salton Sea over the four-year period would be approximately 2,000 AFY. The remainder and any amount that cannot be achieved by the Colorado River Water Conservation Program would be achieved by reducing recharge at CVWD groundwater recharge facilities, which would have no impact to flows to the Salton Sea for the four-year period. The impact on flows to the Salton Sea from Coachella Valley will be small, and therefore are not included in the modeling. See Figure 2 for an illustration of the different short-term reduction scenarios of flow to IID.



**Figure 2.** Schematic of effects of Colorado River allocations on IID inflow to Sea.

Projections of future IID water delivery were produced using the Colorado River Simulation System (CRSS) model developed by the US Bureau of Reclamation. The CRSS model was developed and is used by Reclamation to provide long-term projections at the Colorado River Basin (Reclamation, 2012 [4]). The June 2021 version of the CRSS model was obtained from Wheeler et al. (2022) [5] and was provided with the initial conditions in June 2021. Future water demands as the “2016 demands” (2016 Upper Colorado River Commission Schedule for the Upper Division States; and 2007 Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Colorado River Interim Guidelines with the update on Nevada demand in 2019 for the Lower Division States)

provided in the CRSS June 2021 version (Wheeler et al. 2022 [5]) were used. The projections of water delivery and other conditions at the Colorado River Basin were obtained from the CRSS model during the period 2022–2060.

Three delivery flows were computed as part of the Salton Sea Long Range Plan [6] (high probability, low probability, and very low probability, exceeded 50%, 90% and 95% of the time). For the high probability inflow scenario, water deliveries to Imperial Valley were based on the CRSS model and resampling hydrology from 2000-2018 (information from Wheeler et al. 2022 [5]). For the high probability inflow scenario, the 50th percentile flow (2.535 MAF) is assumed. In other words, the model predicts that 2.535 MAF of inflow to Imperial Valley will be exceeded 50 percent of the time. This represents full delivery of water to Imperial Valley.

Based on climate change effects discussed in, ET is expected to increase by 3.5 to 5.0% by the end of the century based on application of the Penman Monteith Method (see **Table 2**). As a conservative estimate for the future inflow scenarios, an increase of 5% is assumed. Therefore, the climate-adjusted ET rate is 3.78 AF/acre of irrigated land (or 5% increase from the current estimate of 3.60 AF/acre). The volume of water lost assumes an irrigated acreage value of 445,011 acres, which is the average over 2018 to 2021 for the Imperial Valley.

**Table 2.** Penman-Monteith estimates of ET.

<b>Trace</b>	<b>Annual average maximum temperature increase (°C)</b>	<b>Annual average minimum temperature increase (°C)</b>	<b>Average wind speed change (m/s)</b>	<b>Estimated % increase in ET (1971-2000 to 2035-2064) via Penman-Monteith Equations</b>
Low	1.69	1.66	0.987	3.56%
Average	2.01	1.96	0.988	4.46%
High	2.20	2.22	0.990	5.02%

In the Coachella Valley, the Indio Subbasin Water Management Plan Update (Indio Subbasin GSAs, 2021 [7]) was utilized as the source for future inflow to the Sea. The scenario representing future projects with climate change was selected as the most appropriate scenario with 70,000 AFY as the flow representing future conditions at the Sea. This represents the total inflow to the Sea from the Coachella Valley, including the gaged CVSC.

The model results shown here use a future hydrology that linearly decreases from current values to 889,448 (see Table 3) by 2040. Further details about the hydrology in the Salton Sea Long Range Plan modeling work can be found in Appendix B of [6].

**Table 3.** Future long-term hydrology based on LRP high probability inflow.

<b>INFLOW TERM</b>	<b>VALUE (AF/year)</b>	<b>JUSTIFICATION</b>
Imperial Valley	852,900	Inflow to Imperial Valley (2,535,000 AFY) minus ET at 3.78 AF/acre of irrigated land
Mexico	0	Mexico flows gradually decrease to zero from the Scenario #1 value of 66,100 AFY
Coachella Valley	70,000	Simulated drain flow for future projects with climate change scenario (Indio Subbasin GSAs, 2021)
Local watershed	4,680	See Section 5.3.4 of Appendix B in [6]
Groundwater	11,900	See Section 5.3.5 of Appendix B in [6]
Lithium Allocation	-50,000	Lithium is a new and growing water use in the basin.
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>889,000 AF/year</b>	

### Primary Model Calculations

The model operates by water and salt mass conservation of the Sea. At each annual timestep, the following quantities of water volume are added (+) or subtracted (-) from the volume that was present at the beginning of the year:

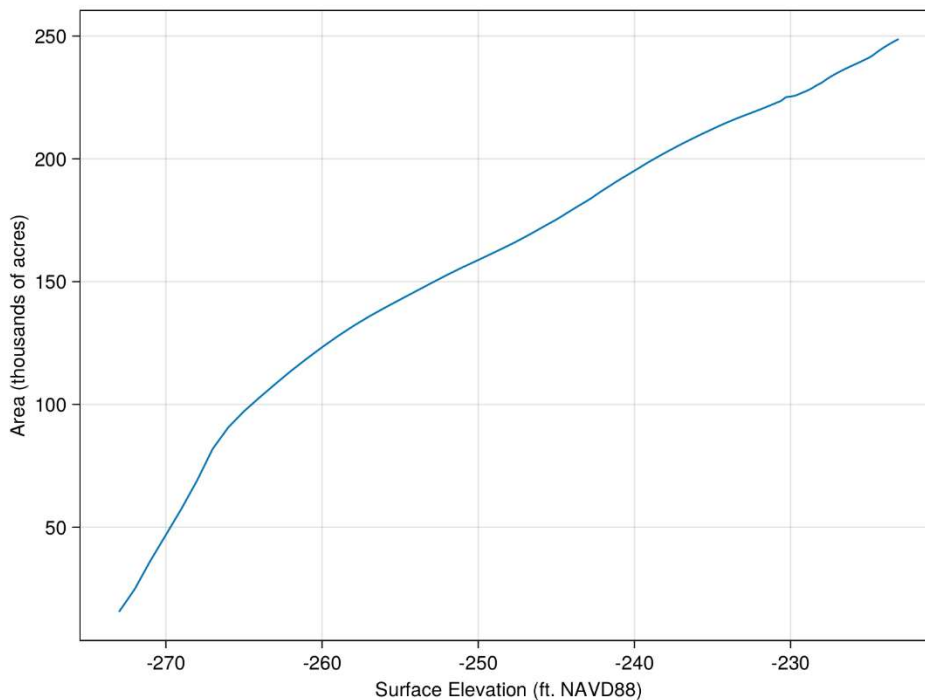
- (+) Freshwater Inflows, a time series input from the relevant estimated hydrology scenario, as discussed above.
- (-) Total Water Volume needed to satisfy evaporation demands of fixed-size conservation projects, when applicable.
- (-) Total Water Volume needed to meet dust suppression obligations, defined as 1 acre-ft of water annually per acre of area within the 2003 shoreline not covered by the remaining Sea or any planned conservation projects in a given year.
- (-) Direct evaporation volume from the dynamically sized Sea, dependent on the area and salinity of the Sea in a given year, using the same quadratic polynomial regression in USGS’s original SSAM model (see below), which takes a baseline evaporation rate (calibrated to be 69.9 inches annual, see below) and returns a smaller evaporation rate with increasing salinity.
- (+) Direct precipitation volume on the Sea. Values from 2004-2012 are from PRISM. More recent years (2013-2022) are filled in from California Irrigation Management Information System (CIMIS) Imperial Valley data. The historical average of the updated dataset is approximately equal to 2.5 inches per year, and that is the value used for all future years.

Similarly, salt mass has the following additions (+) and subtractions (-) at each timestep, assuming direct evaporation and precipitation of water to have minimal effect on salt balance:

- (+) Salt coming in with freshwater inflows, using the inflow-dependent regression present in USGS's original SSAM model, which has higher salt concentrations with lower inflow volumes.
- (-) Annual salt precipitation of 0.15% of the current salt mass in the Sea.
- (-) Any salt above saturation salinity of 280 ppt.

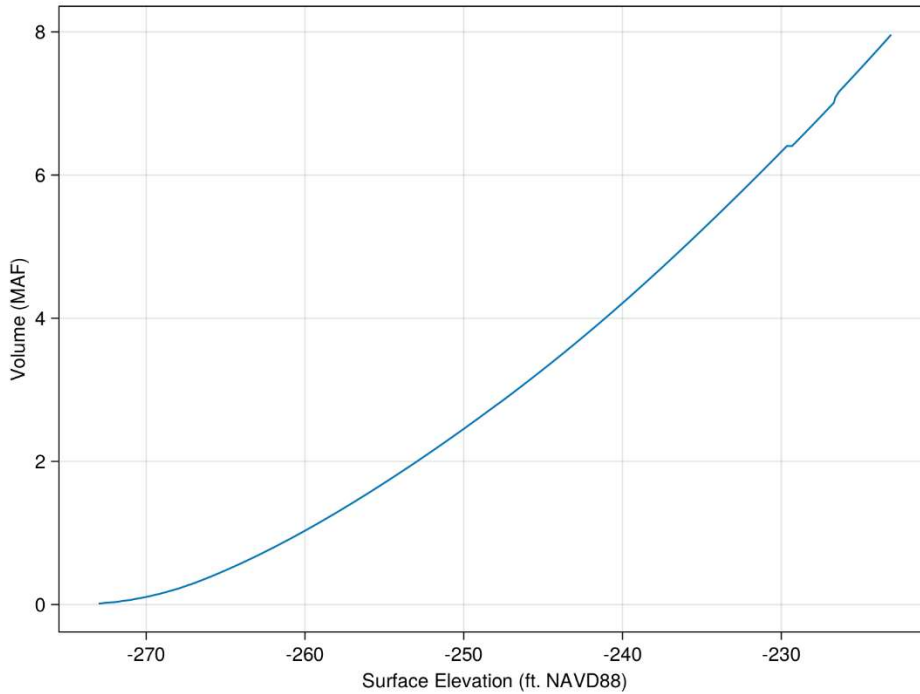
### ***Bathymetry data and EAC curve***

For any state of the Sea, there is a 1-1-1 relationship between its elevation, area, and capacity (volume), also known as the EAC relationship or EAC curve (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). This relationship was estimated from the latest available bathymetry data (interpolated to the nearest 0.1 ft using the underlying raster dataset in [3]) and is available to view in the model spreadsheet EACInput. For each model run, this EAC curve is used to get the initial Sea volume (as the initial conditions are specified as an elevation) and to convert the Sea volume at each timestep to a Sea area and Sea elevation (interpolated to the nearest tenth of a foot, NAVD88).



**Figure 3.** Relationship between elevation and area in the EAC curve used in these SSAM modeling efforts.





**Figure 4.** Relationship between elevation and volume in the EAC curve used in these SSAM modeling efforts.

### ***Salinity-Dependent Evaporation***

The evaporation rate from the Sea’s surface is reduced as salt concentration in the Sea increases. The original USBR SSAM modeled this effect using a regression of the form:

$$E_{net} = E_{base} \cdot \left( \frac{a+b \cdot (S/1000)^{2.5}}{a+b \cdot (S_{ref}/1000)^{2.5}} \right)^2,$$

where:

- $E_{base}$  is the baseline evaporation amount for freshwater,
- $S$ , is the Sea’s salinity at the current timestep,
- $S_{ref}$  is a reference salinity value (set to 45723.33 ppm),
- $a$  and  $b$  are model constants with values 0.981902618 and -1.39819E-07, respectively.

The same equation was used in the SSAM updated by Tetra Tech and is illustrated in Figure 5.

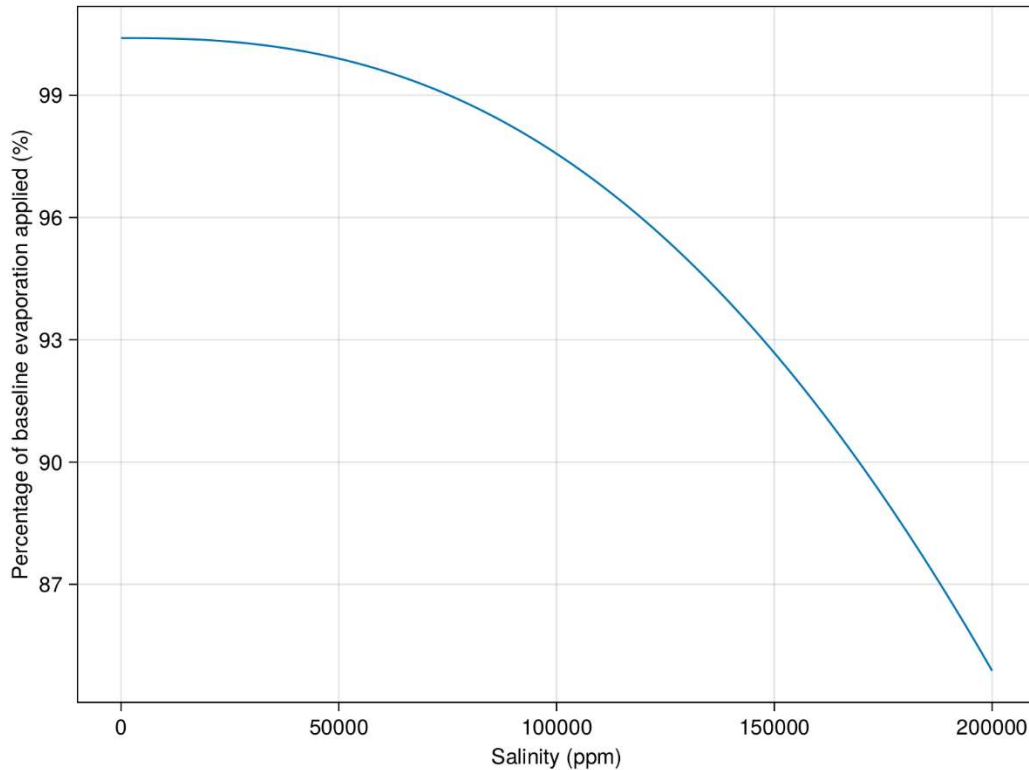


Figure 5. Illustration of decrease in net evaporation with salinity.

### Salinity-Dependent Inflow Salinity

The salinity of the water specified as total inflow depends on the inflow volume in the form of a linear regression used in the original USBR model.  $S_I = a + b \cdot V_I$ , where  $a = 5016.07448$  and  $b = -0.00204508$ , and this formulation has been retained in the Tetra Tech-updated version of SSAM.

### Model Inputs

The main inputs the user is required to provide to the model are the following:

- The initial Sea state. These model runs were set to begin in 2020 at an elevation of - 235.5 ft NAVD88 with an initial salinity of 74,250 ppm.
- Total freshwater inflow at each year, specified as a time series from the chosen starting year to 2100. This is the input that was modified to consider different drought mitigation scenarios. The description of how different potential CO River allocations correspond to different total Sea inflows is described below.
- The baseline evaporation for each year. This was derived as a calibrated average value from historical data from 2004 to 2020. The current value has been set at 69.9 inches per year.
- Although the model is able to simulate water use from conservation projects, the results shown in this memo do not include the effects of 10-Year plan projects, including SCH.

These input data are shown in **Table 4**.

**Table 4.** Primary SSAM input data

Year	Inflow Baseline (af)	Inflow Fallowing (af)	Inflow Fallowing and Efficiency (af)	Base evaporation (in)	Precipitation (in)
2004	1,205,693	1,205,693	1,205,693	66.0	4.4
2005	1,252,187	1,252,187	1,252,187	66.0	4.4
2006	1,214,560	1,214,560	1,214,560	70.0	0.7
2007	1,206,227	1,206,227	1,206,227	66.0	1.9
2008	1,166,790	1,166,790	1,166,790	74.0	2.7
2009	1,058,828	1,058,828	1,058,828	66.0	1.0
2010	1,190,201	1,190,201	1,190,201	69.0	4.9
2011	1,172,468	1,172,468	1,172,468	66.0	1.9
2012	1,267,420	1,267,420	1,267,420	68.0	2.2
2013	1,143,849	1,143,849	1,143,849	74.0	1.8
2014	1,098,163	1,098,163	1,098,163	66.0	0.6
2015	1,126,640	1,126,640	1,126,640	73.0	1.5
2016	1,148,693	1,148,693	1,148,693	74.0	1.9
2017	1,104,305	1,104,305	1,104,305	74.0	4.0
2018	1,065,116	1,065,116	1,065,116	74.0	2.3
2019	1,044,076	1,044,076	1,044,076	68.0	3.4
2020	1,053,611	1,053,611	1,053,611	71.0	2.0
2021	1,093,575	1,093,575	1,093,575	74.0	2.0
2022	1,090,859	1,090,859	1,090,859	69.9	2.5
2023	1,080,139	990,889	958,739	69.9	2.5
2024	1,064,483	975,233	943,083	69.9	2.5
2025	1,048,826	959,576	927,426	69.9	2.5
2026	1,033,169	943,919	911,769	69.9	2.5
2027	1,017,513	1,017,513	1,017,513	69.9	2.5
2028	1,001,856	1,001,856	1,001,856	69.9	2.5
2029	986,199	986,199	986,199	69.9	2.5
2030	970,543	970,543	970,543	69.9	2.5
2031	954,886	954,886	954,886	69.9	2.5
2032	939,229	939,229	939,229	69.9	2.5
2033	923,573	923,573	923,573	69.9	2.5
2034	907,916	907,916	907,916	69.9	2.5
2035	892,259	892,259	892,259	69.9	2.5
2036	891,695	891,695	891,695	69.9	2.5
2037	891,131	891,131	891,131	69.9	2.5
2038	890,567	890,567	890,567	69.9	2.5
2039	890,003	890,003	890,003	69.9	2.5
2040	889,438	889,438	889,438	69.9	2.5

## Model Outputs

The primary outputs of interest are Sea area, elevation, and salinity. These are all reported on an annual timestep in the ModelCalcs spreadsheet.

## Model Calibration

No sufficiently robust sources of direct Salton Sea evaporation data exist, so the baseline evaporation rate was treated as a calibration parameter. Daily Sea elevation data from 2004-2021 and periodic salinity data (approximately every three months) from 2004-2020 were available for use in calibration.

The model was initialized to January 2004 based on the average data of the first month of each of the above series. Then, historical inflow from 2004-2020 was input into the model.

First, evaporation was initialized to 68 inches for all years. Then an iterative calibration process was then applied to each year from 2004 to 2020 to better match observed salinity and elevation data as follows:

- Evaluate the effect of setting the evaporation of the year in question to each value in the set of candidates: {66, 67, 68, ..., 74}. This range was deemed to be consistent with previously used estimates of annual evaporation in other analyses.
- Linearly interpolate the model output within the calendar year since the observed data are daily while the model output is annual.
- Note the rank for each candidate according to best sum of squared error performance on each for salinity and elevation only within the year being evaluated.
- Choose the candidate salinity with the best performance according to the weighted average of three times the elevation rank and one times the salinity rank. The elevation data were given more weight because there is less noise in that dataset.
- Proceed to the next year and repeat the process.

The model was able to match the observed elevation and salinity data well after calibration (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). The resulting average annual evaporation used for all future years was 69.9 inches.

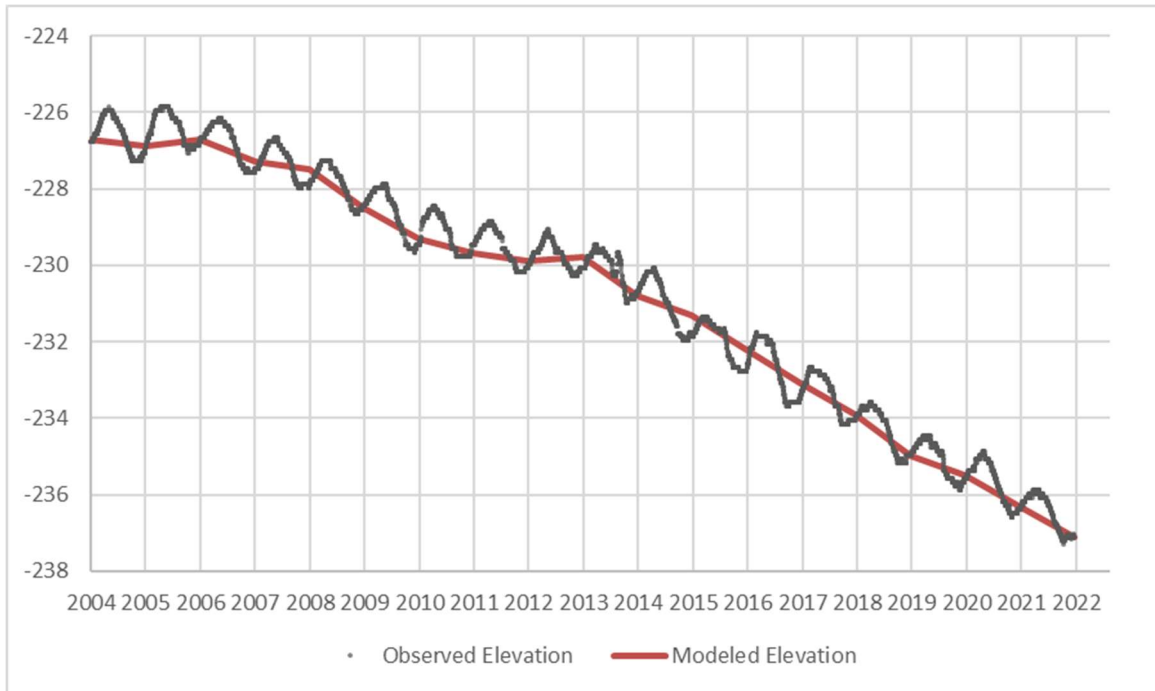


Figure 6. Observed and Calibrated Salton Sea Elevation (ft NAVD88)

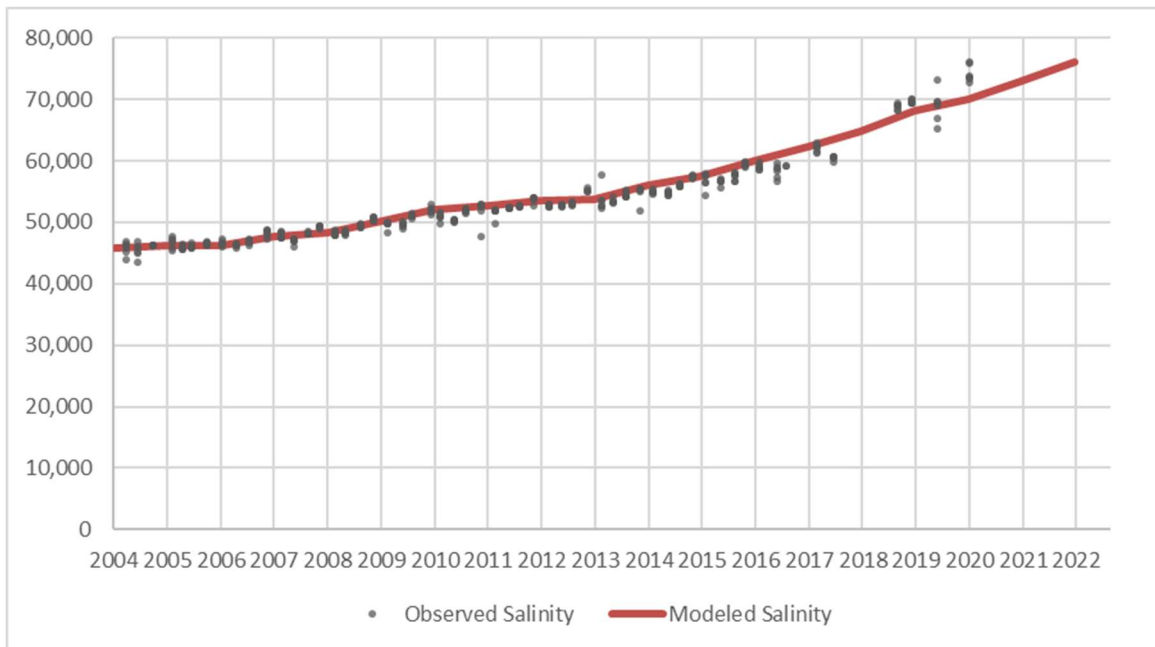


Figure 7. Observed and Calibrated Salton Sea Salinity (ppm)

As a sensitivity analysis, we also repeated the entire calibration with best-estimate historical inflows perturbed by +/- 5%. The case with 5% less inflow decreased the calibrated average evaporation to 68.0 inches, whereas the case with 5% more inflow increased it to 71.0 inches.

### Modeled Inflow Scenarios

Figure 8 shows the three inflow scenarios used for the projections in this study, the baseline projected flow, and with drought conservation with fallowing on IID lands and with fallowing and efficiency on IID lands. Fallowing and efficiency results in lower inflows to the sea than fallowing alone. The drought conservation was applied for 4 calendar years (2023-2026).

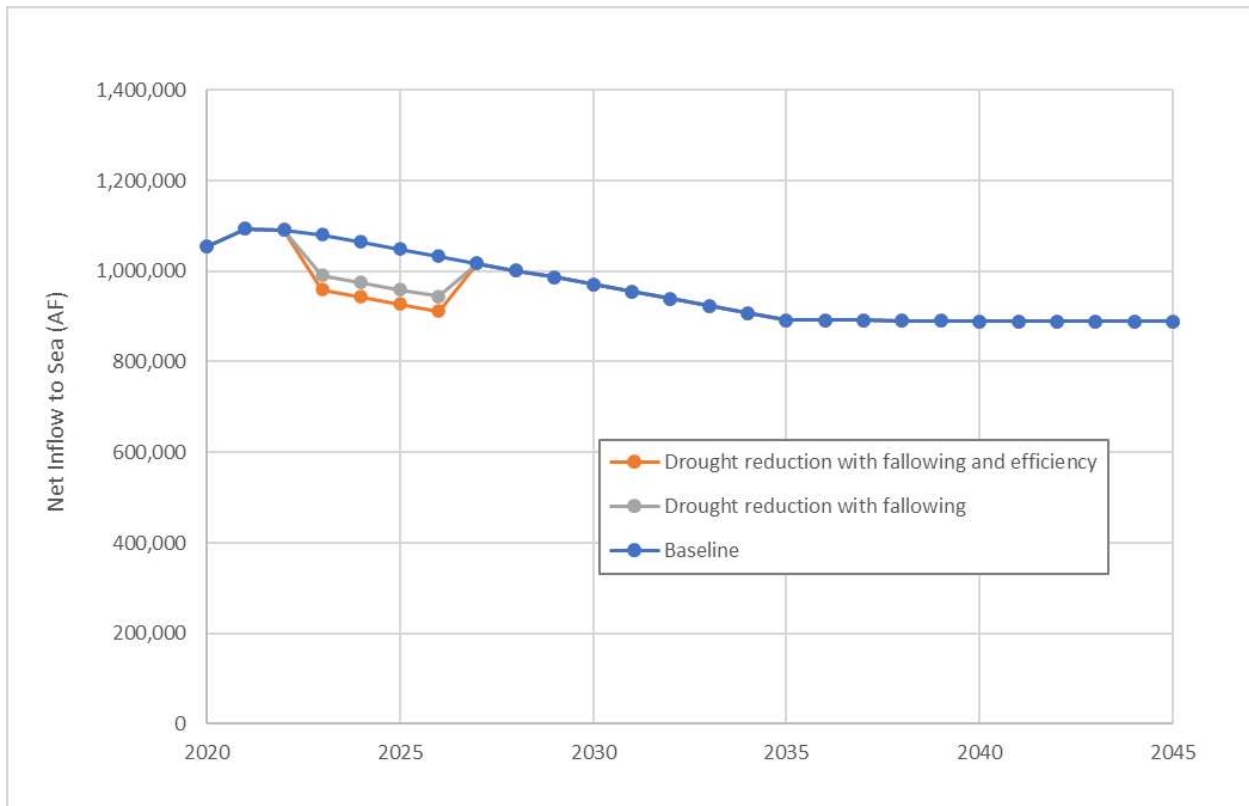


Figure 8. Effect of estimated drought reduction inflows on total inflow to Sea used by the model.

### Results

The figures below show the primary outputs of interest from the updated model. **Figure 9** shows the projected exposed lakebed area from 2020-2045, and **Figure 10** shows the same data zoomed in to show 2020-2035 values.

**Figure 11** shows a comparison of the salinity impacts from 2020-2045, and **Figure 12** shows the same data zoomed in to show 2020-2035.

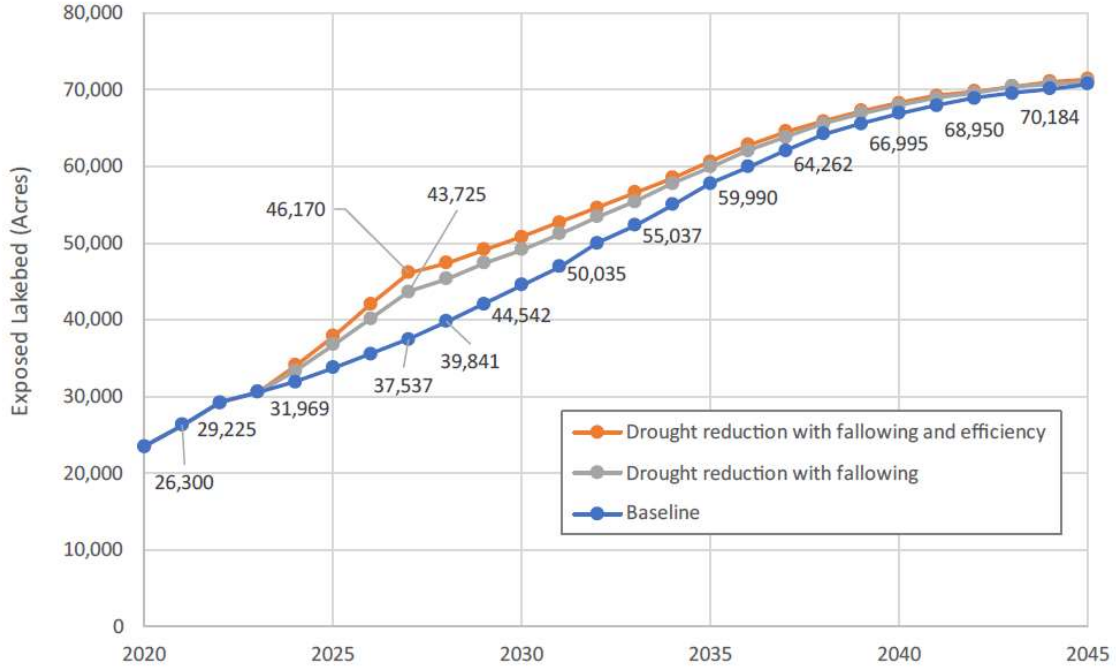


Figure 9. Impact to exposed lakebed from drought reduction scenarios (2020-2045)

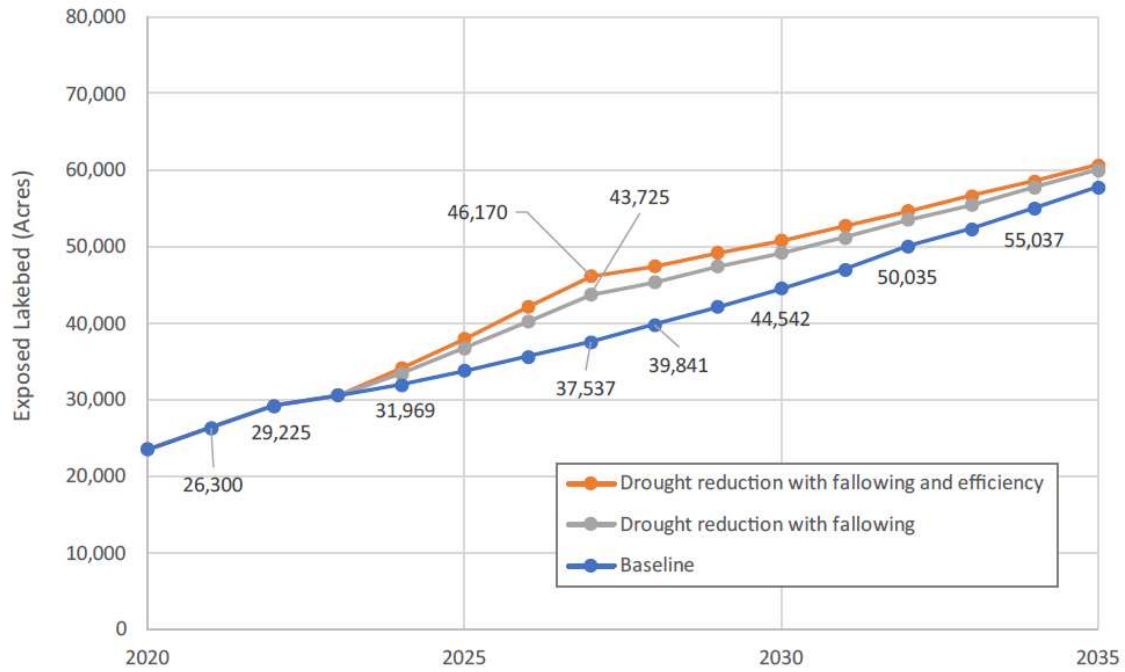


Figure 10. Impact to exposed lakebed from drought reduction scenarios (2020-2035)

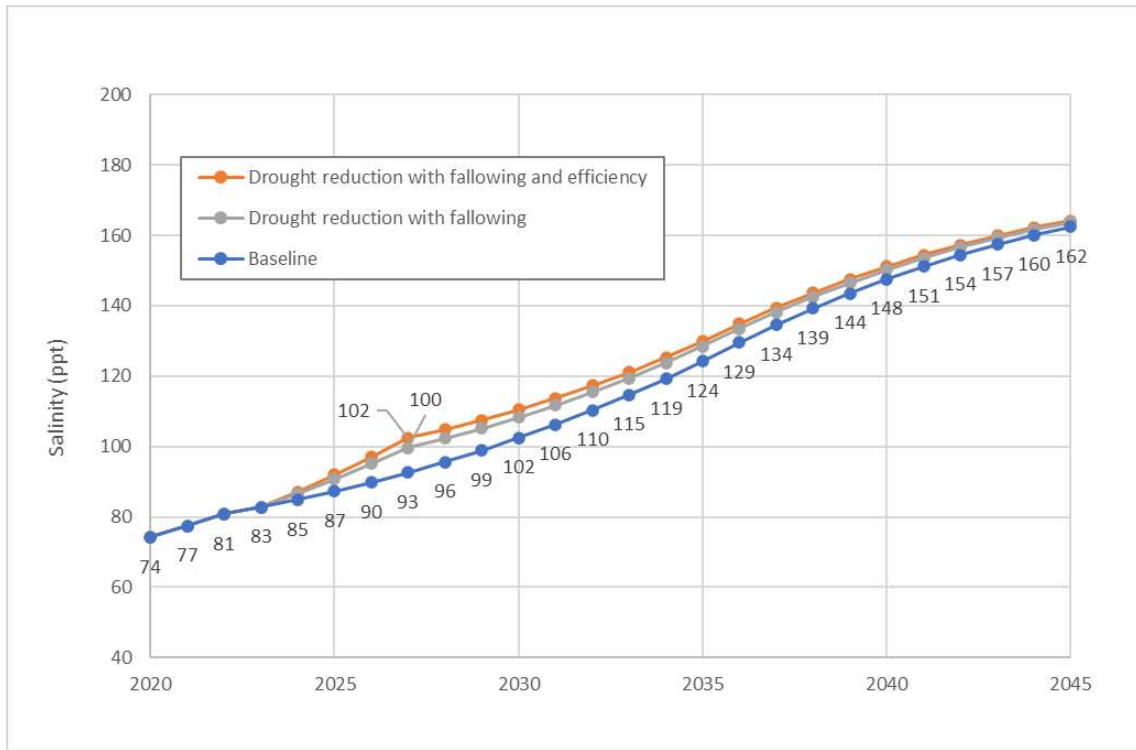


Figure 11. Impact to salinity from drought reduction scenarios (2020-2045)

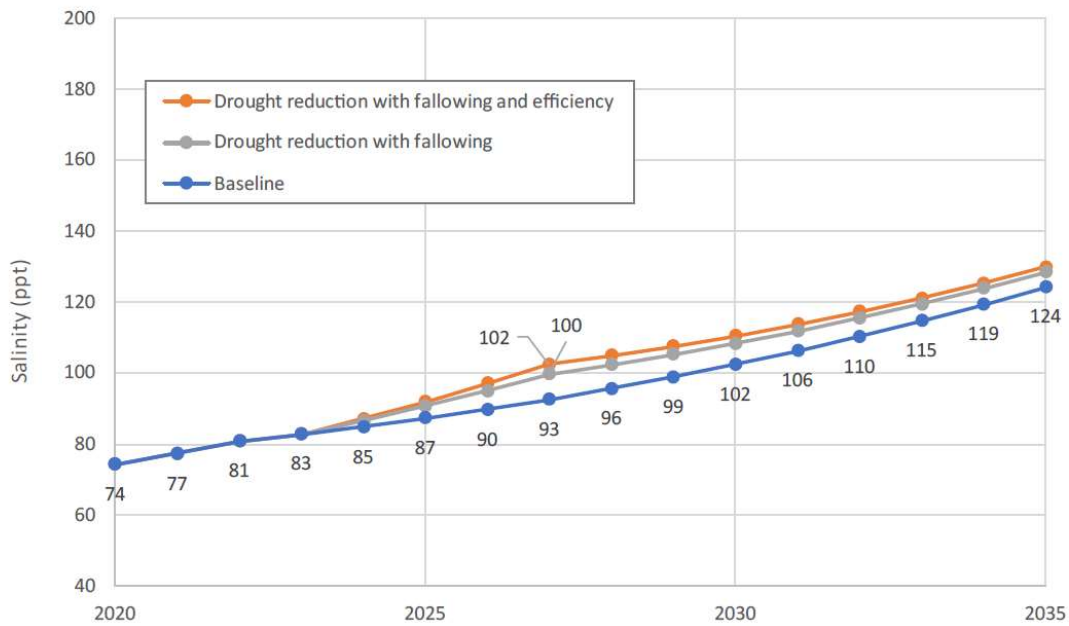


Figure 12. Impact to salinity from drought reduction scenarios (2020-2035)



## References

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