



April 4, 2024

Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia
1021 O Street
Suite 8120
Sacramento, CA95814

Re: **Salton Sea Authority Budget Request – Desert Shores
Restoration Project**

Dear Assemblymember Garcia:

In the furtherance of expedited deployment of projects in the Salton Sea Management Plan (SSMP) to fulfil legal and contractual obligations at the Salton Sea, the following request for funds is respectfully submitted for consideration in the Administration budget to be proposed for January 2025.

In proposing this budget allocation, the Salton Sea Authority (Authority) seeks to bring to completion the first community-centric mitigation and revitalization effort since the state first assumed responsibility for restoring the Salton Sea over 20 years ago. The Desert Shores community, being the largest (and one of but a few) truly waterfront communities whose properties have been left high and dry by the water transfers and absent of subsequent mitigation, are at ground zero in meeting the states obligations to the people of the region. The Salton Sea Authority is requesting \$1.5 million to advance the completion of the Desert Shores Restoration Project.

OVERVIEW:

The Desert Shores community, located on the West Shores of the Salton Sea in far northwest Imperial County, was developed in the 1950s to meet the expanding recreational and lifestyle interest of post- World War II Californians. At the time, the Salton Sea was the most visited tourist destination in California, and communities like Desert Shores sprung up in various locations around the Sea. At the time, the Sea was a relatively stable ecosystem, with the salinity in the Sea kept in check by ever

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increasing return flows from agriculture in the Imperial and Coachella valleys. But that heyday was short lived. As the Sea rose, shoreline communities, including Desert Shores, began to flood. And when the flooding was finally abated through the introduction of conservation, the source water began to degrade and the Sea became less and less able to sustain life due to increasing salinity. As the fish died and the water stagnated, the communities around the Sea became blighted due to neglect and abandonment, transitioning in large part from recreation and resort to substandard accommodations for scores of disadvantaged and marginalized hardworking members of the community.

When the QSA was signed in 2003, restoration of the Sea became a hopeful promise. In the Desert Shores community, that meant a real hope that the continuing declines would be abated and the shoreline would stabilize and the community, so heavily impacted by decades of neglect, would hopefully be rebuilt. But in fact, the opposite happened. The declines accelerated and the Sea receded at an increasing rate, and in 2014 – a decade ago - the marine “keys” access for maritime traffic to the Sea was cut off, destroying the literal backbone of the community.

For the past 8 years, an active group of community stakeholders has been working to refill the Sea. With limited resources and a grand vision, they have worked with universities and other nonprofits to find some way restore the keys. Their plan? “Build a berm, drill a well, fill the keys”. Seemed so practical and so simple. But with the Sea continuing to recede, the community and its keys that were once filled by tidal flows from the greater Sea now must solve a myriad of technical, political, and financial challenges. When it became clear that community effort alone was not going to fix the problem, Imperial County came alongside the community to begin a conversation about what was achievable. The project – at least in concept – was also included in the state’s Salton Sea Management Program (SSMP) and identified as a part of its 10-year plan. And SSMP administrative and technical support was lent to the effort. At the request of the County and the state, the Salton Sea Authority also engaged in the effort, and working with the Bureau of Reclamation was able to secure \$1.25 million in initial funding for the project.

With funding in hand planning began in earnest, with Imperial County taking the lead on securing CEQA clearance and the state advancing its overall environmental assessment for the Sea, which includes this project. Technical resources were also brought on board to preliminarily assess hydrology, geology, and engineering aspects of

the project, as well as legal and other technical expertise to ascertain answers to questions which have dogged this and so many other projects at the Sea, including site control and water supply. To coordinate this initial effort, the Authority enlisted the services of Gafcon, Inc. to codify all the questions and develop a plan, schedule, and budget to get answers required to complete the project. And over the course of the past several months, meetings with community stakeholders, county representatives, and local experts in the fields of lake building and well drilling have been held. The result of that work to date would suggest that while the future prospect of the restoration (or more rightly, repair) of this damaged lake has never been more hopeful.

And while we continue to layer in increasing opportunities for an array of benefits from this investment, we have identified a financial need of \$1,500,000 to accomplish these objectives, which we seek to secure in the state's fiscal 2025 budget. Those dollars will be invested as follows:

Hydrology

As mentioned, the project had historically been served by its adjacency to the Salton Sea. But since that connection has been severed an alternative suitable source of supply must be identified. Extensive work has already taken place and a number of options have been explored, including groundwater, agricultural drain water, pump back from the hypersaline sea, and potentially imported water via the Coachella Canal. While the latter option has all but been eliminated, other alternatives are evolving, including the potential future use of domestic wastewater from the community as it builds out. The evaluation and determination of the proper solution for this project will require the enlistment of a hydrogeologist, which would be covered by this appropriation.

Geotechnical

Historically, the water level in the keys was maintained at that of the greater Salton Sea, and issues like seepage losses and evaporation did not affect the project's functionality. Now that the Sea has receded some 10' or more below any design elevation for the Sea, it will be necessary to evaluate the permeability of the adjacent soils and determine the lake's ability to retain water. That analysis will inform a myriad of other design choices including whether the lake must be lined and with what, and what size pump will be required to maintain an adequate water supply. In that same

regard, while there are historic records of well activity in the region, the project is not in a known area of reliable groundwater, being largely separated from the Indio subbasin. The geotechnical work will evaluate all of these important issues and is included in the proposed investment request.

Critical Habitat/Endangered Species

As presently funded, the project is conditioned to provide habitat when constructed. Informed by our most recent work, there may in fact be an opportunity to develop the project in such a way that it provides critically necessary habitat for the endangered Desert Pupfish. The analysis regarding what types of species can be sustainably managed in the completed project, including water quality, water depth, and other concerns, will be addressed by qualified technical resources, the costs of which are included in this request.

Community Engagement

Long left out of the equation of what is being developed at and around the Sea is input from local stakeholders. In recent years, however, the SSMP and the Authority have elevated the importance of projects in the region reflect the values and culture of the people who live here, now and into the future. This engagement effort will be accomplished from resources outlined in this request.

Engineering / Design

Once all the technical, legal, and cultural questions are asked and answered it will be necessary to engineer this project for construction, the costs of which are included in this important request for funding.

Construction

While it will come at a cost yet to be determined, the Construction phase of this effort should proceed timely and efficiently. And while the technical challenges are considerable, none have been deemed intractable so as to render the project infeasible. With the remaining funds from this request the berm will be built, a well be drilled, and once again, the keys will be filled.

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Page 5 of 5

Thank you for this consideration of these opportunities to fund progress on the SSMP in partnership with the SSA. Please don't hesitate to contact me should you have questions or need further clarification.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "G. Patrick O'Dowd", with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the left and a smaller flourish extending to the right.

G. Patrick O'Dowd
Executive Director/General Manager

cc: Samantha Arthur, Assistant Secretary, Salton Sea Policy, California Natural Resources Agency