

Memorandum

To: Salton Sea Authority Board of Directors
From: G. Patrick O'Dowd, Executive Director /GM
Date: November 20, 2025

Re: Task Force / Framework Update

Since last reported, work continued on identifying foundational elements necessary to create a task force capable of developing and implementing a comprehensive "framework of assurance" to address long lingering Salton Sea health and safety concerns. To date, we have held substantive meetings with senior representatives from local and state air boards and the regional water quality control board, and meaningful conversations with others, including the local vector control board. Based on those conversations we have developed a broad understanding of the task at hand and a glimpse of resources necessary to accomplish that important task.

To recap, there has long been concern by shoreline community residents and others that the changes taking place at the Sea are causing or increasing risks to human health and safety. Universities and local environmental justice stakeholders have done significant, independent research on known or suspected risks including biological toxins and hydrogen sulfide, and anecdotal indicators like elevated asthma levels, bloody noses, and emergency room visits have elevated those concerns. Notwithstanding this important work which significantly informs the public discourse, we have come to understand that it is essential to rely on the public agencies specifically stood up for the purpose of protecting public health. And though there is every reason to expect that each of those public agencies is well run by highly qualified professionals, in no instance were we able to find a clearly defined and well-articulated Salton Sea-specific program.

While each circumstance is discreet, much can be learned from the efforts implemented at Owens Lake to address the serious environmental challenges. Recall that Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), in coordination with Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District (GB), implemented a clearly defined and well understood and articulated monitoring and mitigation plan for the Owens Lake valley which includes (among other things) over two hundred air quality monitors (one every square kilometer when first established), satellite imagery every 5 days, mountain top spotters,

and enforcement and notification tools that ensured that the risks to the fenceline communities is being responsibly mitigated and local stakeholders are being equitably notified. LADWP funds over \$75 million per year in operations and maintenance costs alone at Owens Lake, and funds \$6 million in GB costs, over 80% of their annual operating budget, just to oversee compliance at Owens Lake. It is also worth considering that Owens Lake is 1/3rd the size of the Salton Sea, and GB's principal focus and responsibility is monitoring PM¹⁰.

The Salton Sea ecosystem is a bit more complex, with likely half a dozen different regulatory bodies responsible for protecting locals. And though as stated there is every reason to expect that each agency is living up to its commission, significant local concerns persist. We believe those concerns are derived from a couple of key factors.

First, the sheer diversity of responsibility makes it difficult for locals to know who to look to when they have a concern or question. Second, as stated, there is no comprehensive, agency-specific plan for addressing Salton Sea concerns. And third, it is unclear that, given the diverse, siloed nature of the various responsible agencies, whether there is any gap in the public health assessment regime which might cause unacceptable risk (as may be the case with biological toxins being researched by UCR).

We believe that these concerns can be addressed and these risks mitigated through the coordinated efforts of these agencies, properly directed and resourced. Each agency should be directed to articulate its plan, based on best available science, for properly monitoring activity at the Sea to protect public health, and assign an annual cost for the implementation of that plan. Thereafter, a to-be-formed task force of the responsible agencies should review and test the plans as developed to assure that when aligned all material risks associated with Salton Sea changes, both retrospectively and prospectively, are accounted for by a principally responsible public agency. To the extent gaps are identified, they should be rectified by the collaborative efforts of the task force.

Driven by local leadership, and working in coordination with this task force, supporting resources should be marshalled to further inform this effort. In particular, university research should be targeted and funded to ensure that the most pressing health and safety concerns are receiving the highest priority and adequate funding. Community based science efforts, a program being developed by local environmental justice advocates, should also be aligned with the task force efforts, and their efforts can be directed by local leadership and funded in coordination with the task force to expedite the work and increase public trust in the process and outcome.

Finally, education, outreach, and engagement is a most critical missing element. Aligning both science and the message will be critical to prevent mis-messaging and unnecessary public concern. Through a well-developed program to inform and educate local stakeholders as to the potential risks, what's being done to mitigate those risks, what they must do in the interim to protect themselves from those risks while

mitigation strategies are being developed and implemented, and what resources are available for them to do so.

Recommendation:

Direct staff, in exercising the local leadership role for which the Authority was established, in collaboration with relevant public agencies, and with aligned support from other local leaders, to continue work towards the development of a task force and framework, including pursuit of state, federal, and other funding sources that would allow for a reasonable, reliable, sustainable (target 20 years) program of health assurance.