

Salton Sea Health Assurance Framework

A Strategic Governance Framework for Understanding, Monitoring, and Managing
the Human Consequences of a Changing Colorado River System

Salton Sea Authority

June 2026

Introduction

The Salton Sea is entering a period of rapid and continuing transition.

The system is changing, communities will be affected, and no integrated federal, state, local, tribal, scientific, and public health framework presently exists to understand those consequences as a whole.

For more than a century, the Sea has functioned as the receiving environment for agricultural drainage generated by the Colorado River delivery system. During most of that period, the consequences of that arrangement were primarily hydrologic. Water levels fluctuated. Salinity increased. Biological conditions evolved. The effects remained largely confined to the Sea itself.

That condition no longer exists.

Conservation programs, water transfers, shortage operations, climate pressures, and changing Colorado River management are altering the Sea's hydrology and accelerating shoreline recession. As conditions change, new exposure pathways emerge connecting physical conditions at the Sea to the communities that live around it.

Some risks are understood. Others are not.

The challenge facing the Salton Sea is therefore not simply environmental. It is institutional.

The issue is not the absence of effort. It is the absence of an integrated system capable of understanding, communicating, and managing cumulative consequences over time.

No single entity is presently responsible for understanding the cumulative public-health implications of changing conditions at the Sea. No entity is charged with integrating air quality, shoreline recession, biological transition, vector dynamics, hydrology, community observations, and public-health indicators into a unified understanding of risk.

The absence of that capacity is the problem the Health Assurance Framework is designed to solve.

The Framework establishes the institutional infrastructure required to operate that system on a sustained and transparent basis.

The Right to Know

The purpose of the Framework is not to prove that a particular risk exists.

Its purpose is to ensure that communities have access to the best available understanding of conditions that may affect them, and that uncertainty itself is systematically understood and communicated.

Residents of Mecca, North Shore, Thermal, Bombay Beach, Salton City, Coachella, and the Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians should not be required to assemble information from multiple agencies, studies, jurisdictions, and academic disciplines in order to understand conditions in their own communities.

They have a right to know.

The Framework establishes the institutional capacity necessary to provide that understanding.

In doing so, it transforms dispersed information into actionable public knowledge.

The Federal Nexus

The Salton Sea receives drainage generated by federally authorized Colorado River deliveries. Federal operational decisions influence the quantity, timing, and reliability of those deliveries, and those decisions affect conditions at the Sea.

The federal government owns roughly 40 percent of the lands in and surrounding the Salton Sea and has a legal obligation to manage those lands in compliance with local, state, and federal law, including the Clean Air Act. The Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians' reservation occupies approximately 24,000 acres in and around the Sea, and the federal government holds a legal duty to ensure the protection of those lands.

For that reason, federal participation is not incidental. It is structural to the operation of the system itself.

This is not a claim that every consequence is known. It is a recognition that federal actions influence basin conditions, and that those consequences require coordinated understanding and response.

The Coordination Gap

The Salton Sea is not underserved by agencies. It is underserved by coordination.

Numerous public agencies possess authority over portions of the problem. Air quality agencies monitor dust. Public-health agencies track health outcomes. Water agencies manage water. Tribal governments manage tribal resources. Federal and state agencies collect scientific information. Universities conduct research.

Each performs an important function. None is responsible for understanding the whole.

The result is a fragmented system in which data, expertise, and responsibility are dispersed across institutions while communities experience the cumulative consequences.

Data exists. Expertise exists. Authority exists. But no entity is responsible for integrating them into a coherent understanding and communicating that understanding to the public.

The Framework does not replace those institutions. It connects them.

The Framework

The Health Assurance Framework establishes a permanent, adaptive coordination system built around six core functions: integrated monitoring, hydrologic and exposure modeling, adaptive management, public communication and community notification, interagency coordination, and scientific partnership and community-based research.

Together, these functions create the institutional capacity necessary to understand changing conditions, identify emerging risks, communicate findings, and inform future management decisions.

Success is measured not by the elimination of uncertainty, but by the capacity to identify, understand, communicate, and respond to changing conditions as they emerge.

The Salton Sea Authority

The Salton Sea Authority is uniquely positioned to serve as the coordinating entity for the Framework.

The Authority's purpose is not to replace existing agencies. Its role is to ensure that existing authorities function as a coordinated system, facilitating coordination, maintaining institutional continuity, supporting scientific integration, and ensuring that communities remain informed as conditions evolve.

The Authority's value lies not in performing every function itself, but in ensuring that the many entities already engaged in Salton Sea issues operate as a coherent system over time.

Federal Resources

The Framework requires dedicated federal resources to be established and sustained at a scale commensurate with the public health obligation it addresses. The Owens Lake dust-control program, which costs more than \$75 million per year to operate at a site one third the size of the Salton Sea, provides a useful benchmark for the level of sustained investment that addressing exposed lakebed conditions requires.

Federal resources may be secured through multiple channels, including government-to-government consultation, existing federal commitments, and congressional action. The

federal government's own documented estimates of its management obligations at the Sea provide a meaningful starting point for determining the appropriate scale of that investment.

The Salton Sea is not a static condition to be solved once and forgotten. It is a dynamic system whose hydrology, biology, chemistry, and relationship to surrounding communities will continue to evolve as Colorado River operations evolve. The purpose of the Framework is not to predict every future condition. It is to establish the enduring institutional capacity necessary to understand and respond to those conditions as they emerge.

Conclusion

The greatest challenge facing the Salton Sea is not that all risks are known. It is that many are not.

The Health Assurance Framework acknowledges that uncertainty is itself a management challenge. Its purpose is not to eliminate uncertainty. Its purpose is to ensure that uncertainty is studied, understood, communicated, and managed through a coordinated, transparent, and accountable public process.

Communities living beside the Salton Sea have a right to know what is changing, what those changes may mean, and how public institutions intend to respond.

The question is not whether conditions at the Salton Sea will continue to change. The question is whether public institutions are equipped to understand and respond to those changes.

The Health Assurance Framework exists to ensure that they are.