

Los Angeles Times

Editorial: Saving the Salton Sea is smart environmental policy

By THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD
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They don't like to hear this kind of talk in the rich agricultural lands of the Imperial Valley, but the Salton Sea was a big mistake. It was dry desert land before 1905, when the Colorado River punched through poorly constructed irrigation levees and flowed for two years into a giant below-sea-level depression.

Its waters have no outlet to the ocean, so a century's worth of agricultural runoff and evaporation have left a steadily concentrating brine, made even more noxious by residual fertilizers and pesticides.

With California in the midst of a severe drought, and with thirsty cities vying with even thirstier San Joaquin Valley farmers for Northern California water, and with other Western states now claiming a share of the Colorado River water that flows to Southern California, and with Los Angeles having to cut back on its water imports from the Eastern Sierra in order to restore and preserve Mono Lake and tamp down some of the dust that blows from the dry bed of Owens Lake — do we really need to figure out how to keep precious water flowing to this 110-year-old accident at the far southern end of the state? Can't we just let it dry up and blow away?

But blow where? There's the rub. As the Salton Sea dries up and exposes more lake bed, winds will pick up that toxic mix of contaminated salts and send it through communities in the Imperial Valley and the Coachella Valley. And perhaps further north: In a 2012 event sometimes called "the big burp," many Los Angeles County residents got

a surprising whiff of Salton Sea air, scented by a massive fish die-off. If the pungent aroma can reach Santa Clarita, could not the lake bed dust as well?

Besides, as odd as it may seem, the accidental lake has become a main stop for migrating birds on the Pacific Flyway, which extends from Alaska to the tip of South America. It is for those birds, perhaps, a substitute for Tulare Lake, now virtually forgotten but once the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, between Bakersfield and Fresno, before farmers began diverting its waters for agriculture — at just about the same time farmers further south were inadvertently creating the Salton Sea.

In an ironic twist, the briny lake is also a haven for the desert pupfish, an endangered creature that probably found its way into the accidental lake through irrigation runoff channels.

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California once took more than its allotted 4.4 million acre-feet of Colorado River water, and much of that surplus went to the Metropolitan Water District and ended up in Los Angeles taps, lawns and swimming pools, still leaving plenty to water Imperial Valley agricultural fields and then drain into the Salton Sea. A 2003 pact provides for

more water for the other six states in the river basin. It also includes an epic farm-to-city water trade in which San Diego pays for Imperial Valley water-saving programs and equipment; many valley farmers, who once relied solely on gravity to deliver water to their crops, are now relying on pumps, sprinklers and drip systems. That saves enough water to send up to 200,000 acre-feet a year — enough for about 400,000 households — to San Diego County's urban areas.



Steam rises from several geothermal electric generating plants on the southeast shore of the Salton Sea near Calipatria, Calif. In the foreground is an area of shrinking marshland that's drying up as the level of the Salton Sea recedes. (Los Angeles Times)

But with Imperial Valley farmers becoming more water-efficient, there is less runoff, which means less water coming to the Salton Sea. To mitigate that loss, the agreement keeps some river water running directly to the lake, but only through 2017. After that, the water level is expected to quickly drop. Exposed lake bed, called *playa*, will threaten air quality for the people and wildlife in the region.

The agreement calls for stabilizing and restoring the sea. Estimated cost: \$8.9 billion.

In California, extra spending money is as rare as extra drinking water, so restoration is low on the state's to-do list. The lake has its fans, including duck hunters, boaters and lovers of solitude. It creates a micro-climate that keeps frost away in parts of the Imperial Valley, extending the growing season for winter crops such as lettuce. But it is not universally embraced as beautiful, and besides, there is that odor. The region's relatively sparse population translates into few representatives in Sacramento, and it is far enough away that it is easily forgotten.

The Imperial Irrigation District, the organization that has rights to the water that irrigates the fields, is doing its best to remind the rest of the state that the Salton Sea exists, is in trouble, and can't wait for \$8.9 billion to materialize. It has petitioned California's water board to condition continued implementation of the 2003 agreement on the state fulfilling its commitment to restore the lake — or at least to support the district's own, less-costly interim plan for a series of pools on the periphery for sustaining wildlife and keeping too much *playa* from becoming exposed in order to protect air quality.

The board has scheduled a day-long workshop for Wednesday to hear out the district and others on their ideas for the Salton Sea. Board staff are wary; they note that a different agency is supposed to take the lead on restoring the sea and that it would be unwise to do anything that might unravel the hard-fought settlement of more than a decade ago.

But it's encouraging that the board is giving the matter some consideration. Los Angeles, in its settlement over the dust whipped from the now-dry Owens Lake, learned the hard way about the economic and environmental cost of allowing a large body of water to dry up; and the Salton Sea, as the largest lake in the state (now that Tulare Lake is gone), is three times as large and would leave behind a far more toxic mix of dust to ruin Imperial valley crops and sicken the people of Southern California. The Salton Sea may have been an accident, but now that it's here it would be a worse mistake to allow it to disappear.

The workshop will be webcast at calepa.ca.gov/broadcast.