

Our last chance to save the Salton Sea?

By Denise Moreno Ducheny
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It is time for us to make a decision about the fate of the Salton Sea.

The California Department of Water Resources is close to finalizing a draft of alternatives for the Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration Plan and related documents. Controversy surrounds the plan, especially its assumptions about how much water will flow into the Salton Sea in the future. Even greater controversy will greet the release of the alternatives, especially when people see the amount of money required to restore even a part of the sea.

The Salton Sea, which is California's largest lake, stretches about 35 miles from the lower Coachella Valley into the Imperial Valley. Sustained almost entirely by water draining from nearby farms, the lake collects salts, fertilizers and contaminants that concentrate in these waters.

Despite poor water quality, the Salton Sea is a very productive lake in the midst of a desert and offers an incredible ecological haven to millions of migrating birds, including several endangered and threatened species. The lake also attracts its share of people seeking quiet, wildlife scenery and affordable land.

For thousands of years, the Colorado River has created lakes within the Salton Sink. The current Salton Sea was formed in 1905 and celebrated its centennial last year. As the Salton Sea loses its water flows to water transfers from the Imperial Valley to San Diego, reduced flows from Mexico, urbanization, changes in farming practices and climate change, the likelihood of the Salton Sea reaching a bicentennial is growing slim. According to a Pacific Institute report released this month (www.pacinst.org/saltonsea), without a restoration project the surface of the lake will drop 20 feet in the 10 to 12 years after 2017, cutting the Salton Sea's volume in half and tripling its salinity. The impacts of such a rapid change would be catastrophic for wildlife, ranging from loss of habitat to widespread disease.

These impacts would not be limited to the birds. The lake could recede four to five miles from its current southern shoreline, exposing more than 130 square miles of lake bed. The wind farms alongside Interstate 10 near Palm Springs testify to the strength and frequency of the winds that blow through the Coachella Valley and down across the Salton Sea.

An increase in exposed lake bed would only mean more air quality problems for the region, which already fails to meet state and federal standards. The hospitalization rates for children with asthma in Imperial County are already the highest in California, and three times the state's average. The Pacific Institute report estimates that exposing 130 square miles of salty lake bed could increase the amount of blowing dust by a third, harming tens of thousands of children, elderly and those with breathing problems. The local billion-dollar agricultural economy would also suffer, as would those seeking to enjoy the extensive recreational opportunities throughout the region.

The costs of doing nothing at the Salton Sea would be devastating, and is not an option. As we review the restoration alternatives by the Department of Water Resources next month, we must take into account the magnitude of these human, environmental and financial costs.

Although the initial costs of these restoration alternatives will be high, Californians must remember that it is in all of our interests to improve the environmental health and economic development opportunities at and around the Salton Sea. If we fail to act, we could squander our best, and perhaps last, chance to save the Salton Sea.

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