It’s Time to Secure the Future of the Salton Sea

We have a plan. We have initial funding. What we need are results.

People and wildlife are at risk as the Salton Sea, California’s largest inland lake, continues to shrink due to rapidly declining inflows. The State of California has instituted the Salton Sea Management Program, which is intended to meet the State’s obligation to manage the Salton Sea. Unfortunately, despite more than fifteen years of study and planning at the Salton Sea, the State has yet to complete a habitat project on exposed shoreline to address the crisis.

The stakes for failure at the Salton Sea are high. More than 650,000 people live in the immediate area and will suffer adverse health impacts due to additional dust pollution arising from the unmanaged exposed playa. More than 400 species of birds have used the Salton Sea and many of these species are rapidly declining at the sea.

Overall, failure to act at the Salton Sea will result in billions of dollars of economic loss due to impacts to public health, the environment, and local economies.

We need a Salton Sea program that can complete the projects with the funding available and create a series of new projects for a vibrant, sustainable Salton Sea.

California has already raised some of the money needed to implement the Salton Sea plan, but while the funding is available, it’s not creating change on the ground.

What’s the hold-up?
- Lack of adequate staff at the state level to manage the plan implementation
- Permitting issues
- Ambiguity around leases and property rights
- Lack of inter-agency coordination
- Funding is available but it is not flowing to projects

Money needed $425 million
Money raised $280 million

What lives at the Salton Sea?

Birds that depend on the Salton Sea include:
- Western Grebe
- American White Pelican
- Cinnamon Teal
- Northern Shoveler
- Ruddy Duck
- Eared Grebe
- Great Blue Heron
- Double-crested Cormorant
- Least Sandpiper
- Western Sandpiper
- Black-necked Stilt
- Snowy Plover

Many fish-eating birds depend on tilapia, and their numbers are declining as tilapia disappear.

What’s the future of the Salton Sea?

During the 20th century, California lost 95% of its wetlands and inland lakes.
Which birds are winning and losing at the Salton Sea

American White Pelican

Eared Grebe

Western/Least Sandpiper

Ruddy Duck

The Salton Sea is a public health issue

The Salton Sea area already has some of the worst air quality in California. The prevalence of dust that is smaller than 10 microns in size means that residents—especially children and the elderly—are at much higher risk of developing long-term lung issues and lung diseases like asthma and COPD. As the Salton Sea shrinks, the former lakebed turns into exposed playa. According to research by University of California at Riverside, playa dust is high in particulates that are 10 microns or smaller. This means that as the Salton Sea recedes, the disease burden on the already-burdened human population will increase, leading to billions of dollars of economic losses for the region.

650,000 number of people who live around the Salton Sea

12,000 number of children with chronic lung disease in Imperial County

2x number of childhood asthma-related ER visits in Imperial County compared to the rest of California

$37 billion potential economic losses as disease burden increases

Our recommendations to revive the Salton Sea

Staff the project adequately and relocate office to the Salton Sea region

Program staffing should include a director and fulltime staff with expertise habitat and air quality management projects, in-house communications, and legal and administrative staff.

Develop a process for rapidly identifying and resolving property and liability disputes

Stakeholders should commit to a timetable to resolve differences or agree to third-party mediation.

Develop a coordination plan across agencies

Coordinated planning and master permitting processes with local, state, and federal agencies will speed up project design, permitting, and construction.

Listen to local community needs

Actively solicit community input early in the project planning process, and budget for projects that include recreation and other community benefits in addition to providing habitat and controlling dust.

Become more flexible and responsive

A more flexible long-term governance structure should yield faster implementation of projects than current state processes allow.

Plan for the future

Develop a long-range plan by reforming the long-range planning committee and consulting individuals that participated in the Owens Lake Master Plan to apply lessons learned to the Salton Sea process.

Budget for the future

Identify funding sources for long-term operations, maintenance, monitoring, and adaptive management.

The State of California has the power—and the responsibility—to fix this.

Myths vs. Facts

MYTH The Salton Sea was created in 1905.

FACT The Salton Sea has been filling and refilling for millennia as the Colorado River has shifted over time. The lakebed was purposely used to capture runoff from Imperial Valley farms.

MYTH Nobody lives there, so it’s not a big deal if it dries up.

FACT More than 650,000 people live in the region of the Salton Sea. Its shrinkage poses a public health crisis as dust from exposed playa can harm people in nearby communities.

MYTH The Salton Sea is unnatural and shouldn’t be perpetuated.

FACT Many of the natural inland bodies of water—Owens Lake, Tulare Lake, Mono Lake—have been heavily reduced or eliminated by human activity. Birds and people use the Salton Sea now, and we have a duty to protect it.

MYTH It doesn’t matter if the lake’s tlapia population dies.

FACT Many of the 400 species of birds that use the lake depend on fish stocks, such as Brown Pelican and Western Grebes. These bird populations are crashing because the fish population has crashed.

MYTH California has already funded the solution to the Salton Sea.

FACT California has allocated about $280 million to solve the problem. Most agree that it will take about $4 billion to completely resolve.

MYTH The State of California has fulfilled its responsibility to the Salton Sea and the people who live around it.

FACT The State missed deadlines that were part of the 2003 Quantification Settlement Agreement, and has yet to complete a single project at the Salton Sea in accordance with the Stipulated Order it signed in late 2017.