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Experts mobilize to save the sea

Lake dying: Palm Springs conference draws dozens to formulate plan to keep state's largest inland body of water from going under.

By MATT FITZSIMONS
The Desert Sun

PALM SPRINGS — More than 80 scientists, engineers and government officials gathered to examine problems facing the Salton Sea, the largest panel of experts ever assembled to save the dying lake.

The conference at the Marquis Hotel, which lasts four days and covers topics ranging from agriculture to zooplankton, is the latest sign the Salton Sea is emerging as a national priority.

GAINING ATTENTION: "I think it is now gaining its rightful place in the unfortunate annals of what needs to be fixed," said Mike Spear, the regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Salton Sea's growing prominence comes after decades of neglect allowed it to slide toward disaster. It is the drainage point for 500,000 acres of farmland and the polluted New River, yet has no outlet. Rapid evaporation leaves behind tons of salt and metals each year, making the lake 25 percent saltier than the ocean.

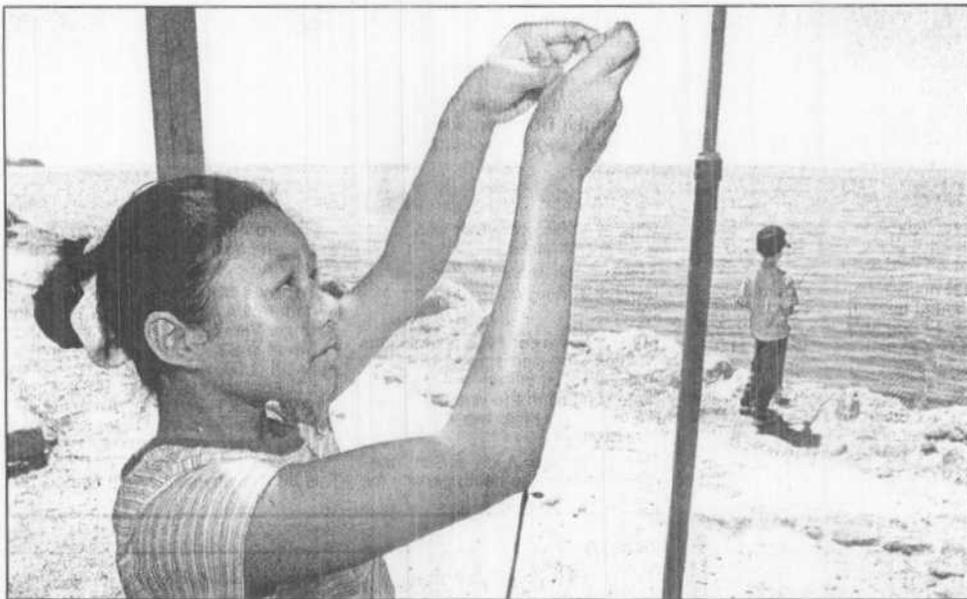
Proposals to reduce salt concentrations include pumping water 35 miles south to the Sea of Cortez and pumping less salty water back, diking off part of the lake and using it as an evaporation pond, or building a canal that would provide an outlet to the Sea of Cortez.

The lake, a key stop on the Pacific Flyway, also has become a death trap for thousands of migratory birds since 1992. Outbreaks of avian botulism at the sea have killed an estimated 15 percent of America's white pelicans. Newcastle's disease recently surfaced as another killer of waterfowl; the cause of other deaths remains a mystery.

BIRD DEATHS: And late summer — the season of death on the Salton Sea — fast approaches.

"There's a good chance we're going to be up to our elbows in dead birds again," Clark Bloom, who oversees the National Wildlife Refuge at the Salton Sea, told participants.

Against that gloomy backdrop, efforts to reclaim the sea recently gained momentum. Earlier this



Photos by Letta Cowart, The Desert Sun

On the hook: Ashley Abena, 11, of Lakewood baits a hook while cousin Mickey Prigatano, 8, tries to catch a fish.

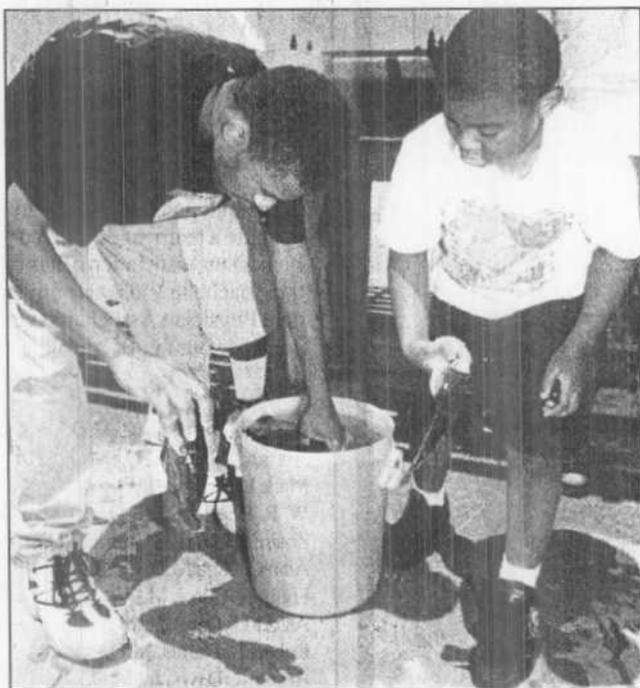
year, five congressmen from the Inland Empire formed a task force on the Salton Sea. More recently, the lake has been the subject of national media attention. In October, three congressional committees will hold hearings on its plight in Riverside and Imperial counties.

The point of this week's conference is to gather technical advice from experts culled from the public, private and academic sectors. Most agree the effort is long overdue, and a sense of urgency permeates their work. Participants were encouraged to raise questions and suggest short-term research but were warned that now is the time for action.

NO MORE STUDIES: "One thing I hear from the people in Congress is that they don't want any more studies," said Patrick Quinlan, an aide to Rep. George Brown, D-San Bernardino.

Spear similarly offered words of caution, calling for cooperation among agencies more accustomed to attacking problems from their own, sometimes narrow perspectives.

"This is going to require tremendous state, federal and local efforts," Spear said. "No one entity has the answers here, and everybody has a tremendous stake in the outcome. . . . What's also obvious is that there's no right answer yet."



Big catch: Melvin Wimberley (left) and Roderick Zeigler Jr. check their bounty after a day of fishing at the Salton Sea.