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January 17, 2004, Vol. 36, No. 3, Pages 137-200

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COVER STORY



Long-Distance Operator

BY JAMES A. BARNES

Like the only two Democrats to win the White House in the past three decades, Howard Dean is running as an outsider. At times, he sounds as if he is challenging his own party's Washington elite as much as he is President Bush. But as an insurgent who has morphed into a front-runner before a single vote has been cast, Dean unexpectedly finds himself in the position of quietly courting his party's Washington establishment even as he continues to very publicly run against it.

THE CAMPAIGN



Policy Purveyors

BY ALEXIS SIMENDINGER

They develop policy ideas to counter the incumbent president or the primary opponents. They touch base constantly with outside advisers to give a campaign fresh approaches or even gravitas. And they try to make their candidate's platform credible, just in case he or she goes the distance to the Oval Office. An inside look at the world of campaign policy directors.

ABORTION



A Call to Arms

BY ELIZA NEWLIN CARNEY

Energized by enactment of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, both anti-abortion activists and abortion-rights groups are gearing up for massive get-out-the vote efforts this election year. But abortion politics could prove tricky for President Bush: The more overt Bush makes his appeal to social conservatives, the more he risks alienating swing voters.

COVER PHOTO:
GETTY/SHAWN HEASLEY

A WEIRD INLAND SEA MAY GET SAVED

THE ENVIRONMENT

BY LOUIS JACOBSON



ZUMA PRESS/CATHERINE BAUKNIGHT

MARY BONO: California representative has helped lead the effort to save the mercurial Salton Sea, a 376-square-mile, very salty inland lake in Southern California that shrinks and expands but is valuable to farmers, recreational users, and nearby Palm Springs.

SALTON CITY, Calif.—In a state overflowing with natural beauty, the Salton Sea—California’s largest inland body of water—has long been the geographical equivalent of Rodney Dangerfield.

For starters, it’s not really a sea. It’s a lake formed by accident between 1905 and 1907, after the Colorado River burst through a dike and flooded a trough in the middle of a scorching desert. Today, the sea is saltier than the oceans and nowhere near as pretty as Lake Tahoe. Worse, it is prone to algae blooms that kill fish en masse and produce an overpowering stench.

These problems have made the present-day Salton Sea area something less than upscale. To the south are impoverished farmworker communities, and to the east is an old Army installation where footloose wanderers have established a primitive and often lawless community called Slab City. With glib disdain, the *Lonely Planet Guide to California* calls the Salton Sea’s landscape of aging picnic areas, railroad tracks, and electrical-transmission wires “surprisingly unattractive.”

Yet over the past few years, scientists, environmentalists, industry leaders, and elected officials, led by the local member of Congress, Rep. Mary Bono, R-Calif., have become increasingly convinced that life in Southern California would take a turn for the worse if the Salton Sea were to disappear. So momentum is now gathering behind creative—but potentially budget-busting—engineering projects that would curb the lake’s rising salinity and an overabundance of choking nutrients.

The Salton Sea reached a crucial milestone in October, when the Department of the Interior finalized a long-debated plan to divert large amounts of Colorado River water away from farmers in the heavily irrigated nearby Imperial Valley and send it to the expanding metro areas of San Diego

and Palm Springs. Although this epic shift of water from rural to urban areas could worsen the Salton Sea’s problems in the long run, pressure by Bono and others resulted in the inclusion of special provisions in the Interior agreement to ensure that the shift would not unduly deprive the sea of needed water.

“I see the agreement as a good turning point, but a temporary one,” Bono told *National Journal*. “I believe that one day, we will be faced again with metro areas looking to the sea for their water needs. But this buys us some time.”

The challenges posed by the Colorado River transfer also helped induce a far-reaching shift in scientific and public opinion over the past few years. “When I first began working on this project, most decision makers in California and Washington said, ‘What the heck—who cares about the Salton Sea?’” said Tom Kirk, executive director of the Salton Sea Authority, an agency that local water districts and counties with a stake in the sea established a decade ago. “By now, I think that has changed. Among many people, the view of the sea has improved significantly.”

On one level, the sea’s troubles are emblematic of a widespread loss of wetlands in the United States. California alone has lost more than 90 percent of its wetlands. This shortage has left the Salton Sea as one of the few major wintering stops along the Pacific Flyway, a key avian migration route. Not only has the resulting crowding of birds and waterfowl at the sea aided the spread of disease, but the presence of nearly 400 bird species in one place—including such endangered species as brown pelicans, peregrine falcons, and bald eagles—means that environmental problems at the sea could have far-reaching ecological consequences.

Yet as bad as the situation could be for wildlife, officials here emphasize that people, too, could suffer. Countless residents

of Southern California could experience a drastic decline in air quality if the 376-square-mile sea is allowed to dry up, leaving behind a dusty—and potentially toxic—scabed vulnerable to scattering by the winds.

Scientists now know that the Salton Sea's "accidental" emergence nearly a century ago was not an anomaly but rather a reversion to form. Today's bean-shaped lake is actually a small remnant of the ancient Lake Cahuilla, which, at its peak, stretched as far south as the Gulf of California, now located some 100 miles south of the sea. Over the course of geologic history, Lake Cahuilla emerged and vanished repeatedly, most recently (before its current incarnation) filling up between 300 and 500 years ago.

For years, most Californians' feelings toward the sea were shaped by a few high-profile facts—namely, warnings against eating the fish, combined with the proximity of raw sewage from Mexico and pesticides from irrigated farms in the Imperial Valley. But in recent years, the sea has begun to shake its reputation as a major destination for ground-level pollutants. Salton Sea Citizens Advisory Panel member Norm Niver—a retired bass player who moved to Salton City decades ago for its quiet, laid-back attitude—always believed those fears were exaggerated. "I've been eating the fish for 30 years, and I'm fine," he said. "No one goes down to the bottom and sucks up mud."

Niver can take further comfort in recent studies showing far less pesticide pollution than had been feared. Moreover, while the sea does collect some of its water from the New River—dubbed "the toilet bowl of Mexico" for its content of raw sewage—most of this waste appears to be purged during the water's 70-hour trip northward. "If you could take out the salt, the water would meet clean-drinking-water standards," said Tim Krantz, an environmental scientist who manages the Salton Sea Database Program at the University of Redlands.

Yet every bit of good news seems to be offset by another reason for concern. One problem is the sea's continued accumulation of nutrients, mostly from agricultural runoff. These nutrients encourage the proliferation of algae, which in turn hog the water's oxygen and kill the fish. The resulting boom-and-bust cycles for fish and birds strain the ecosystem's viability and make life unpleasant for the humans nearby.

Another problem is the rising salinity level, which threatens the survival of some of the sea's fish species. "There are indications that the fishery is very unstable right now, and that a keystone species, tilapia, may be reaching its salinity threshold," Krantz said. A crash in the fish population would injure the local fishing, hunting, and birding industries, thus exacting an economic toll as well as an ecological one.

Yet high salinity wouldn't be the only—or even the worst—danger of a dying sea.



OLD SALT: Salt and minerals encrust old machinery at a farm swallowed up by California's Salton Sea.

Shrinkage would also expose more and more sediment to the air, allowing sandstorms to inflict poor air quality and lung ailments upon more-populated neighboring areas, especially the Palm Springs corridor, which has already been putting up with the sea's foul odors. Shrinkage would also expose the seabed's naturally occurring—but, for now, well-sequestered—heavy metals, including cadmium. Laying the metals bare would endanger not only people but also the food crops growing nearby in the Imperial Valley.

An oft-cited cautionary tale concerns what is now called Owens Dry Lake. Between 1913 and 1926, Owens Lake, in central California, was drained to bring water to Los Angeles. But removing water from some 20,000 acres has allowed enormous amounts of dust to blow away, prompting some of the nation's highest rates of asthma and pulmonary ailments. Lawsuits have forced the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to undertake expensive projects to keep the dust in check, but in many cases, officials say, the results have been unsatisfactory.

Salton Sea advocates fear something similar—or worse. At a conservative estimate,

the Salton seabed is four times as large as Owens Dry Lake's, Krantz said, and whereas the Owens Valley "is surrounded by uninhabited sagebrush, the Salton Basin has half a million people in and around Palm Springs." The potential effects on air quality, he said, are what "forced people to face up to the fact that this wasn't just about fish and wildlife. Human health, too, is at stake."

Stabilizing the sea, if it could be done, would also provide ancillary economic benefits. Reducing airborne pollution would

protect clear, scenic views of the nearby desert mountains, and keeping a stable Salton Sea shoreline could boost the area's prospects for real estate development. Improvements like these could benefit places such as tiny Salton City, which was built with a flourish in the 1950s and 1960s, an era when famous entertainers partied here while watching nationally televised speedboat races. Since then, Salton City and its neighbors have become sleepy backwaters, overshadowed by the development of freshwater meccas such as Lake Havasu, Ariz.

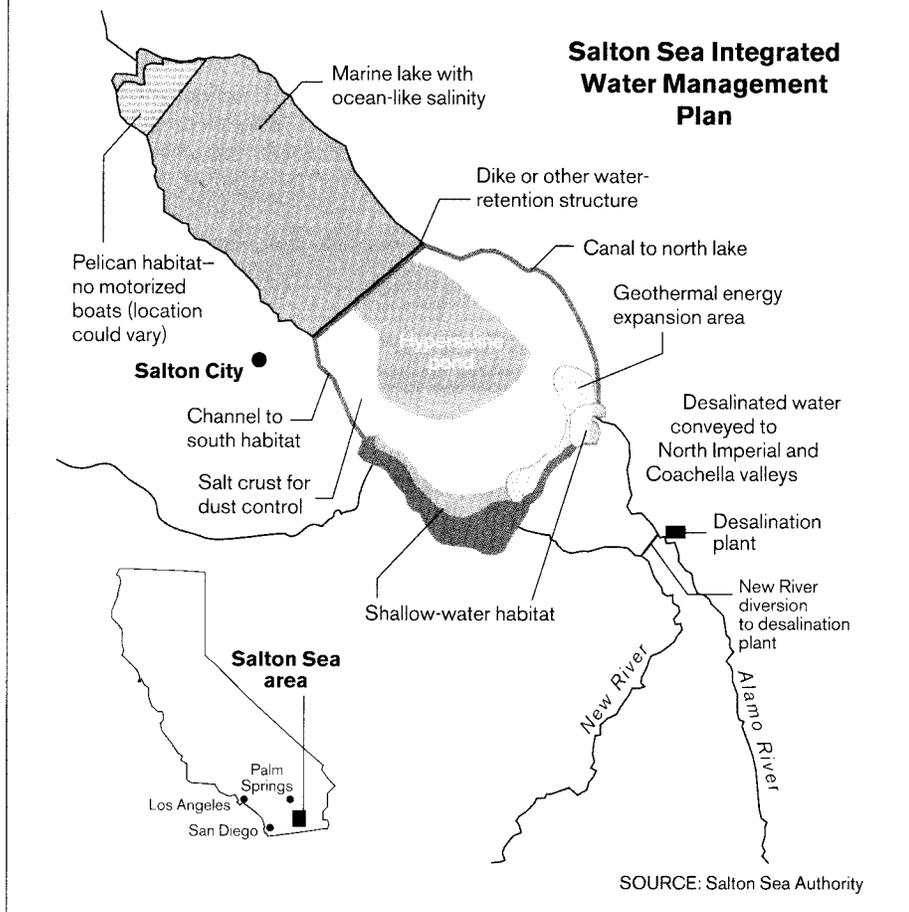
But the key question—unanswered for now—is whether the sea can be saved without costing unacceptable amounts of money. In 1998, Congress passed the Salton Sea Reclamation Act, which commissioned a study of how to save the sea. Since then, the Interior Department, under both Republican and Democratic secretaries, has discussed technical solutions for saving the sea but has not made much progress toward implementation. "Momentum to restore the sea was lagging," said one veteran of the policy battle. "A lot of people feel that the feds don't want to come up with a solution, because then they'd be pressured to pay for it."

An added layer of complication came from the landmark rewriting of the federal Colorado River framework. The process provoked much discord among the residents of the seven Southwestern states that were affected, including outrage among Imperial Valley farmers who stood to lose water under the reapportionment of river-water rights. But an agreement was finally reached in October, requiring substantial water transfers from the Salton Sea basin to the San Diego and Palm Springs areas. These transfers will be phased in slowly and with safeguards designed to keep the sea's inflows as stable as possible.

Ironically, the peril posed by the water transfers helped stiffen the resolve among

PRESERVING THE SALTON SEA

This is one proposed engineering plan that has received widespread attention in the effort to save California's endangered Salton Sea. The plan would reduce the sea by roughly half its size, but it would use canals, diversions, and dam-like structures to manage salinity levels in different parts of the sea to accommodate the particular needs of wildlife, boaters, fishermen, and farmers.



environmental groups to protect a body of water they had once ignored as “artificial” and unworthy of saving. “It was both a nail in the coffin of the Salton Sea and an opportunity to reach out to broader constituencies,” said Kirk of the Salton Sea Authority. “It took an external threat before people said, ‘Hey, this is an awfully important place.’”

The completion of the transfer agreement has also lent a degree of urgency to the study of engineering plans that could save the sea.

A bit of outside-the-box thinking has led to a plan that is attracting serious attention. The Salton Sea Integrated Water Management Plan—which won the endorsement of the Salton Sea Authority

last April—would construct a barrier across the lake, roughly at its midpoint. Agricultural runoff—currently one of the sea’s major sources of new water—would be mechanically desalinated in the southern half. Some of the water would be cleansed to a high level of purity, to be sold to distant cities or used locally by farmers. The rest of the water would be reduced to ocean-like salinity levels and sent to the northern half of the sea. There it would help preserve a smaller version of today’s lake, where current recreational activities could continue.

In the meantime, the super-salty brine would be contained in the southern portion and used to create new wildlife habitat in addition to what already exists at the

Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge. Enough salt could be corralled, experts say, to double the amount of available habitat for waterfowl. In addition, the plan would allow most of the current seafloor to be covered either by water or by salt, thus limiting air pollutants.

By using the available water more wisely, the authority says, the plan could help limit the impact of the federally mandated water transfers on Imperial Valley farmers. And the stabilization of the shoreline would reassure property owners and bolster development prospects.

Best of all, the area’s abundant geothermal resources could power the desalination process. Many hope that the plan could enable energy companies to access geothermal vents that are currently untapped because they’re underwater. Opening these reserves could boost the state’s renewable-energy capacity and also add jobs in Imperial County, California’s poorest.

Kirk, the proposal’s chief architect, is quick to acknowledge the plan’s obstacles. Recent surveys of the seabed suggest that it may be too mucky and unstable to support a dike, especially given the seismic activity lurking beneath the sea. This crucial finding has stimulated interest in using alternative techniques to block off the northern half of the sea, possibly adding to the project’s cost.

The evolving state of the technical knowledge has kept Mary Bono from endorsing any single engineering plan. “People are moving away from the idea of a dike,” she said. “The idea is still morphing.”

An equally daunting obstacle is the project’s cost. “We don’t know yet whether we’re talking about a \$1-billion-to-\$2-billion project or a \$6 billion project,” Kirk said. “If it turns out to be a \$1 billion or \$2 billion project, it seems like there could be support. If it’s \$6 billion, it might bust all the circuit breakers.”

In the big picture, the Salton Sea’s dilemma illustrates the grand bargain of Western settlement—namely, using human ingenuity to harness tremendous natural forces, with all the benefits, and drawbacks, that such an approach entails. The quest to dam, direct, and otherwise dominate what were once free-flowing waters has left the American Southwest with few alternatives, Krantz said. “If we are to maintain these resources,” he said, “it will require management by human beings in perpetuity.”

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