

California and the West

U.S. Unveils Plan to Save Salton Sea

■ **Environment:** Officials cite its ecological and agricultural importance to justify high cost.

By TONY PERRY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

After the most rigorous scientific study ever done on California's most troubled body of water, federal officials Thursday unveiled an environmentally ambitious and costly proposal to save the Salton Sea.

The officials also stressed that contrary to its putrid smell and off-putting look, the sea is not hopelessly polluted and is actually robustly healthy in many ways.

Although the price to save the tea-colored body of water that straddles Imperial and Riverside counties could run more than \$1 billion, officials said the sea is vital both for the ecology of the Western United States and the agricultural economy of California.

"This is an area that deserves investment," Acting Deputy U.S. Interior Secretary David Hayes told a Salton Sea symposium in Desert Hot Springs attended by environmentalists, residents, farmers, water district officials and others.



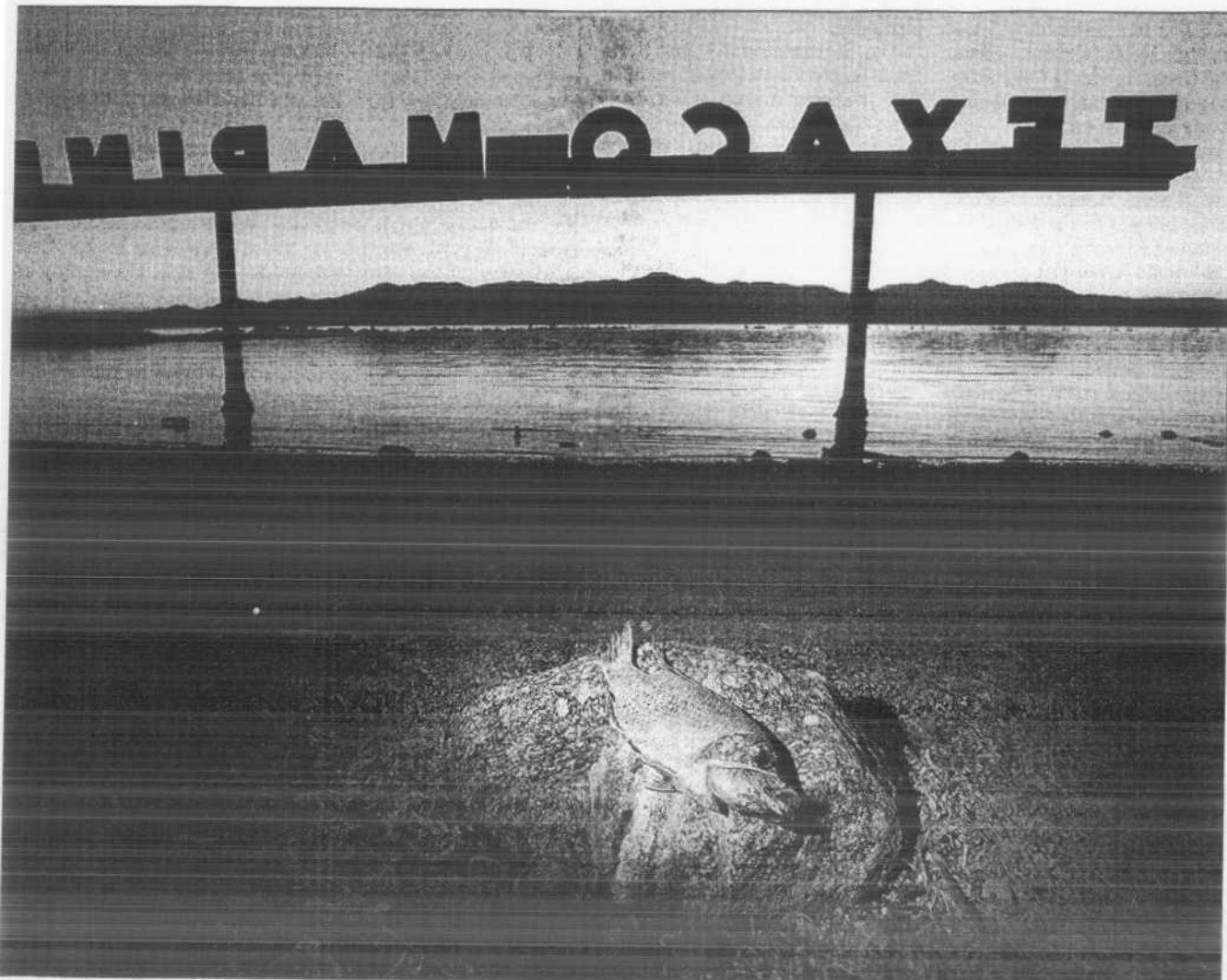
Los Angeles Times

The sea, 35 miles long and 15 miles wide, is a stopover point for millions of migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway. It serves as an agricultural sump and a fishing and boating spot.

The save-the-sea strategy involves several immediate plans of attack, including cleaning up the dead fish that ring the shore, harvesting fish to reduce overpopulation, continuing to study bird die-offs and enhancing recreation.

A pilot program would reduce the rising salinity by a technique using evaporation. Water from the sea would be sprayed into collec-

Please see SALTON, A15



LUIS SINCO / Los Angeles Times

s on north shore of Salton Sea, part of a puzzling die-off. Costly federal plan to save the sea has been unveiled.

SALTON: U.S. Unveils Plan

Continued from A3

tion basins, the salt would settle to the bottom and then it could be carted off to landfills, at least in theory.

The immediate programs, costing several million dollars, will be financed by money appropriated by Congress in 1998. Longer-range alternatives will be submitted to a 90-day public review before one or more of those alternatives is submitted to Congress for funding.

Among those alternatives are building dikes and large-scale evaporation ponds and digging a trench to take salty water from the Salton Sea to a dry lake in Mexico.

Tom Veysey, Imperial County supervisor and president of the bi-county Salton Sea Authority, said the drive to cleanse the Salton Sea is, at long last, moving from "planning for restoration to actually beginning restoration."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) said the proposal signals "a breakthrough day for the Salton Sea. At last there is agreement that we must save the sea. To do nothing is to condemn a body of water twice as big as Lake Tahoe to putrefy."

Salinity is seen as the main environmental culprit at the sea, robbing the water of oxygen and leading to the growth of algae that emit a rotten-egg smell. Oxygen depletion also kills millions of fish. The Salton Sea is 25% saltier than the Pacific Ocean.

The 18-month study, ordered by Congress, found that contrary to widespread belief, the sea's woes are not the result of toxics and pesticides from agricultural runoff.

"What in some instances has been accepted dogma [about the Salton Sea] is now being revealed to be largely myth," said Milton Friend, the lead federal scientist on the Salton Sea. "Innuendo is now being challenged by data."

The fish population, thought to be dwindling, is actually booming, pesticide levels in the water and sediment are minimal, and

there is no evidence of bacteria in the sea that can harm humans, Friend said.

One idea discussed in the past was to reduce the salinity level by bringing water from the Colorado River by a pipeline or ditch. As an engineering matter, it is not a complicated task; as a political matter, it would be virtually impossible.

A summary of the environmental report on proposed alternatives notes that the Department of the Interior has "potential concerns" about using Colorado River water to supplement the natural and unnatural flows into the Salton Sea.

"Concerns" is a politic way of saying that Arizona, Nevada and other states that draw from the Colorado River adamantly oppose using the river to assist the Salton Sea.

The Department of the Interior is trying to persuade those states to drop their historic distrust of California and agree to new rules that would allow California to get more surplus water from the Colorado River. Any suggestion that the government wants to use the Colorado River to bail out the Salton Sea could kill any chance for an agreement on such rules.

The Salton Sea is a mistake born of engineering hubris when early water entrepreneurs in the Imperial Valley thought they could tame the Colorado River. Instead, the river in 1905 jumped its banks and flowed north into an ancient lake bed for months before the breach could be sealed.

What was left was a body of water sitting on a massive salt deposit and without a source of fresh water. For decades, the sea flourished as a recreation area and resorts catered to the Hollywood crowd. Some years, more visitors came to the Salton Sea than to Yosemite.

But in recent years, salinity has taken its toll. Before it was banned, DDT was blamed for bird deformities. Recent bird die-offs have been linked to avian diseases.