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Bill would hurt, not aid, Salton Sea

A death warrant is being drafted for the Salton Sea.

Disguised as a bill to salvage the sea, legislation drafted by San Diego and Imperial county water agencies would authorize a huge water transfer of irrigation water to San Diego and the Coachella Valley from Imperial Valley. The result would be a death knell for perhaps the most incredible fishery in the nation and perhaps the loss of most, if not all, of the hunting and birding opportunities on the Salton Sea.

Steve Horvitz, park superintendent at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area, said he received a copy of a discussion draft of a proposed bill that was written by the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) and the San Diego County Water Authority (SDCWA). These two agencies are now shopping around for a legislator to carry the bill to make it a reality.

"When you first read it, it sounds like a very good thing for the sea," said Horvitz. But he said the reality is far different.

The crux of the bill would propose a transfer of 300,000 acre feet of Imperial Irrigation District (IID) water to two other agencies — 200,000 acre feet to the San Diego County Water Authority and 100,000 acre feet to the Coachella Valley Water District.

Cropland in Imperial County either would be left fallow or planted in crops that need less water.

The Salton Sea would be less fortunate. Currently, the sea receives about 1.3 million acre feet of water a year, with 97 percent of that water coming from agricultural runoff.

Dr. Tim Krantz, who is the program manager for the Salton Sea Database Program at the University of Redlands, said the transfer of 300,000 acre feet of water a year from the Salton Sea basin would drop the level of the sea 15 feet and expose 62.5 square miles of lake bottom sediments. The sea would become so saline that it would not support any fish or wildlife.

In plain terms, the nation's most incredible and arguably most prolific fishery would be dead not long after this plan is implemented.

Krantz also warns of the agricultural and human health impacts



OUTDOORS

Jim Matthews

due to winds picking up the saline silt from the drying lake bed and depositing it on crops and people in Imperial and Riverside counties. Krantz cites Owens Dry Lake in southern Inyo County, which he says has the worst particulate air quality in the United States.

"Water transfers from the Salton Sea Basin, without guarantee of replacement water, spell death to the Salton Sea, degradation of agriculture, and loss of quality of life and human health to the rest of us," said Krantz.

The draft of the legislation would provide funding and water to create two wildlife riparian areas on the north and south end of the Salton Sea, which makes the legislation sound rosy. Ironically, the water needed to maintain the two riparian areas is far less than the 1 million-plus acre feet per year the Salton Sea receives now.

Aside from the destruction of the Salton Sea as we know it, the draft also would limit the liability of the water transfer to a single, one-time payment of \$30 million to mitigate for any losses.

"I challenge anyone to believe we could create that much fish and wildlife habitat with \$30 million. We are not that god-like," said Krantz.

The proposal recently passed the Salton Sea Authority, a joint powers agency, by a 4-2 vote.

U.S. Congressman Sonny Bono championed the salvation of the sea for economic, wildlife and recreational reasons. Before him, Congressman Jerry Pettis was the vocal proponent of the Salton Sea. Both men died in tragic accidents before seeing their dreams of protecting and preserving the Salton Sea come to fruition.

This proposal is the antithesis of what they were trying to accomplish.