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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Bureau of Reclamation

Salton Sea Project, Riverside and Imperial Counties, California

AGENCY: Bureau of Reclamation, Interior.

ACTION: Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Report

(EIR)/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the improvement of the Salton Sea, California and notice of public scoping meetings.

SUMMARY: Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and the Salton Sea Authority (Authority), State of California, in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act, will be preparing an EIR/EIS document to assess the impacts of alternative solutions for improving conditions of the Salton Sea (Sea) located in Riverside and Imperial Counties, California.

DATES: Written comments on the scoping issues will be accepted until September 30, 1998. Public scoping meetings will be held in the area surrounding the Sea and Riverside and Imperial Counties in California. Details regarding dates, locations, and times will be announced at least 15 days prior to these meetings.

ADDRESSES: Comments should be sent to Bureau of Reclamation, Lower Colorado Region, P.O. Box 61470, Boulder City, NV, 89006-1470. ATTN: Salton Sea Program Manager or to the Salton Sea Authority, Tom Kirk, Executive

Director, 46-209 Oasis Street, 2nd Floor, Indio, CA 92201.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT: Mr. William Steele, Salton Sea Program Manager (Reclamation), at (702) 293-8129; or Mr. Tom Kirk, Salton Sea Authority Executive Director, at (760) 863-7942.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Public Law 102-575, 1992, directs the Secretary of the Interior to "conduct a research project for the development of a method or combination of methods to reduce and control salinity, provide endangered species habitat, enhance fisheries, and protect human recreational values . . . in the area of the Salton Sea. . ." In addition to this authority, Reclamation and the Authority have entered into an agreement, Salton Sea Planning and Research Program, to jointly study problems associated with the Sea.

The Authority is a public agency formed under the provisions of Articles I and II, Chapter 5, Division 7, Title 1 of the Government Code of the State of California for the purpose of "directing and coordinating actions relating to improvement of water quality and stabilization of water elevation and to enhance recreational and economic development potential of the Sea and other beneficial uses, recognizing the importance of the Sea for the continuation of the dynamic agricultural economy of Imperial and Riverside Counties."

The Sea is a hypersaline lake located in a closed basin of the southern California desert; it is the largest body of water within California. The Sea was initially formed in 1905-1907 by flooding on the Colorado River which breached

an irrigation control structure allowing virtually the full flow of river water into the Salton Basin. The Sea's current existence is primarily due to agricultural drainage from the Imperial, Coachella, and Mexicali Valleys; smaller volumes of municipal effluent and storm water runoff also flow to the Sea.

The Sea is home to a highly eutrophic ecosystem and a highly productive sport fishery. The Sea, and wetlands along its shoreline, are a critical part of the Pacific flyway providing seasonal and migratory habitat to millions of birds of varying species. Several endangered species, including the desert pupfish and the Yuma clapper rail, inhabit the Sea and/or adjacent habitats.

The Sea ecosystem is under stress. Increasing salinity, currently about 43 parts per thousand, is threatening the reproductive ability of some parts of the biota, particularly the sportfish species. Other potential issues include high nutrient loading, heavy metals, DDT residues, and discharges of agricultural chemicals to irrigation drains leading to the Sea. At the scoping meetings, participants will be requested to identify other potentially significant issues as well as potential alternative solutions.

The purpose of the project is to identify a plan that improves the human environment and ecological conditions of the Sea. Based on past studies, various alternatives to control salinity in the Sea have been investigated. These alternatives include diked impoundments, pump-out, a combination of impoundment and pump-out alternatives, and salt removal from inflow to the Sea. Other options may surface during the scoping process. Opportunities to address other environmental issues facing the Sea, including issues related to

wildlife resources, will be investigated and considered for implementation as we increase our understanding of the Sea's ecology.

The objectives of this effort are to evaluate alternatives to (1) maintain the Sea as a reservoir of agricultural drainage, (2) provide a safe, productive environment for resident and migratory birds and endangered species, (3) restore recreational uses, (4) maintain a viable sport fishery, and (5) identify opportunities for economic development.

The analysis will address the current issues of (1) accumulation and concentration of salts, nutrients, and organic compounds and other constituents, (2) water elevation stabilization, (3) reduced recreational use of the Sea, and (4) reduced ecological values. The environmental document will also address any Indian Trust Assets (ITA) of the Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians and assets of any other Tribe(s).

Some preliminary environmental and engineering baseline data has already been collected and the project is now ready to undergo the CEQA/NEPA process. The Secretary of the Interior has identified this as a high priority project and action is being expedited due to the worsening conditions at the Sea. Over 200,000 birds have died at the Sea over the past six years as a result of the current conditions. Reclamation and the Authority will be working closely with interested Congressional members and other stakeholders to develop possible solutions.

A Research Management Committee (Committee) has been established of high-level managers from the Authority, State of California, U.S. Department of

the Interior, and the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians. This Committee makes funding and other relevant decisions regarding science to be funded to support the CEQA/NEPA process. A Science Subcommittee (Subcommittee) has been established to serve as an independent and objective advisory committee to provide scientific evaluations and recommendations to the Committee. The Subcommittee functions as a coordinated body to determine information gaps, identify science / information needs, and provide the Committee with recommendations for funding priorities regarding the science activities.

The draft EIR/EIS is expected to be completed by the end of December 1999.

Date

Robert W. Johnson
Regional Director
Lower Colorado Region