

Politicians, scientists discuss solutions to saving sea

DESERT HOT SPRINGS (AP) — Depending on the season, the Salton Sea can resemble pea soup or burnt coffee.

With no natural ability to flush itself and high evaporation, California's largest lake is essentially a salty, agriculture waste water pit. Still, it supports one of North America's most productive fisheries, thousands of migratory birds and some aquatic sports.

That odd imbalance is what makes restoring and preserving the desert sea a challenge. In an attempt to do something before it's too late, residents, environmentalists and politicians start a two-day meeting in Desert Hot Springs Thursday to discuss possible

solutions and prepare a recommendation to Congress.

"There is this really neat opportunity," said Tom Kirk, executive director of the Salton Sea Authority. "That is, we don't have ... farmers vs. developers, environmentalists vs. developers. Generally everyone is on the same side but for different reasons."

Such meetings have been held over the past decade, but Kirk said the restoration movement gained momentum a couple of years ago because of the late Rep. Sonny Bono. He increased Congressional attention to the sea and his death in a skiing accident helped galvanize supporters.

The Salton Sea was created by mistake in 1905 after the Colorado River burst through a canal and flooded an area 120 miles north-east of San Diego, straddling Riverside and Imperial counties. The lake is below sea level and is 35 miles long, 17 miles wide and 40 feet deep.

People initially snapped up seaside real estate envisioning a Southern California version of Lake Tahoe, but the sea's popularity faded by the 1960s. The sea had sucked salt out of the desert over the years, making it 25 percent saltier than the Pacific Ocean. Farm irrigation runoff and pollution from the Alamo and New rivers were also blamed for

the growing number of fish and bird deaths, which have reached the thousands.

Still, state officials have never been required to post contamination warnings because the water is safe enough for fishing, boating and water skiing, Salton Sea officials said.

"People have this impression that the Salton Sea is sort of a cesspool. If I had to go swimming somewhere, and pick a day at random, I'd pick the Salton Sea over (San Diego's) Mission Bay," said Stuart Hurlbert, a San Diego State University biology professor, who has studied the sea for about 10 years.

The results of several scientific studies and a draft environmental impact report will be discussed at the meeting. Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Interior Deputy Secretary David Hayes were scheduled to speak Thursday.

Interior Department officials are expected to make a recommendation on which restoration plan should be presented to Congress this session.

The Salton Sea Authority and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation support a plan costing as much as \$1 billion to build 300 towers that would pull water from the sea and spray a mist into collection basins.