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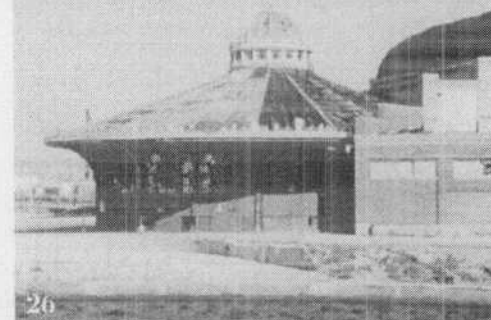
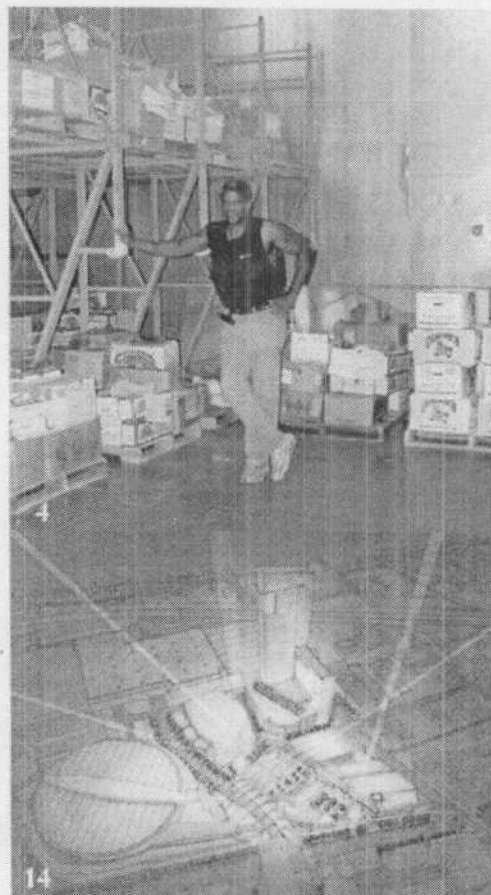
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Colorado River Paet Buys Time for Inland Sea

The signing in October of a landmark agreement that governs how water from the Colorado River is divided among states in the southwestern U.S. has profound implications—some positive, some negative—for the Salton Sea, the largest inland body of water in California.

The sea, covering 370 square miles, was formed between 1905 and 1907, when 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 ocean and is prone to algae blooms that kill fish en masse and

Salton Basin and send it to the burgeoning metropolitan areas of San Diego and Palm Springs. While this epic diversion could worsen Salton Sea problems in the long run, political pressure resulted in provisions in the agreement that minimize the transfer's impact on the sea.

"I see the agreement as a good turning point, but a temporary one," says U.S. Rep. Mary Bono, R-Calif., a leader in the fight to protect the sea. "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."

Growing support

The threat of Salton Sea water being sent to urban areas also helped rally support among politicians, environmental groups, and members of the public who had been skeptical about the urgency of saving the sea because of its "accidental" creation and fear of accumulated pesticide residues from farms in the Imperial Valley and of raw sewage that drains into the sea from cities in Mexico.

"When I first began working on this project, most decision makers in California and

The Salton Sea continues to attract nutrient-rich agricultural runoff that supports oxygen-hogging algae. . . . straining the ecosystem's viability.

produce an overpowering stench, factors that have stalled upscale development nearby.

The loss of wetlands elsewhere in California, however, has left the sea as one of the few major stops for hundreds of migratory bird species. In addition, keeping the sea at its present size is the only thing preventing a drastic decline in air quality for residents of Palm Springs and other desert communities within 50 miles. A shrinking sea would leave behind a dusty—and often toxic—layer of sediment vulnerable to scattering by the winds.

Because of such concerns, many scientists, environmentalists, business leaders, and elected officials have become convinced that the sea must be saved. Doing so will require creative and potentially budget-breaking engineering projects designed to reduce shoreline recession, rising salinity, and an overabundance of choking nutrients.

The Colorado River agreement, debated acrimoniously over the course of a decade, will divert large quantities of water from farms in the

Washington said, "What the heck—who cares about the Salton Sea?" says Tom Kirk, executive director of the Salton Sea Authority, an intergovernmental agency. "By now, I think that has changed."

But while the extent of pesticide and sewage contamination has been shown to be less serious than once feared, the sea continues to face big problems. It continues to attract nutrient-rich agricultural runoff that supports oxygen-hogging algae. These in turn produce boom-and-bust cycles for fish and birds that strain the ecosystem's viability and make life unpleasant for humans nearby. Another problem is rising salinity, which harms many fish species.

Most ominously, reduced water inflow and a shrinking sea could expose more sediment. This sediment could then be carried by sandstorms to populated portions of the Palm Springs corridor. Storm-borne particulates and heavy metals could inflict lung damage on residents and poison the Imperial Valley's fertile farmland.

Sea preservationists cite Owens Lake in central California, which was drained between 1913 and 1926 to carry water to Los Angeles. Removing water from some 20,000 acres has allowed enormous amounts of dust to blow away, prompting some of the highest rates of asthma and pulmonary ailments in the nation.

Conservatively, the Salton seabed is four or five times the size of Owens Dry Lake, says Tim Krantz, an environmental scientist who manages the Salton Sea Database Program at the University of Redlands. 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 impact on air quality, Krantz says, is what "forced people to face up to the fact that this wasn't just



People fish (above) just off the harbor at world set out on a boat tour of the sea in

about fish and wildlife. Human health, too, is at stake."

If the sea's 95-mile shoreline could be stabilized, the area's development prospects would get a boost. The sea's odors and ecological instability have left the region lightly developed, even though the sea sits on the fringe of a booming, upscale corridor that stretches east from Palm Springs. To the east of the sea is recreational land hemmed in by unsightly railroad tracks and electrical transmission wires, as well as an old Army installation where footloose wander-



That's why, when the sea Authority

ers have established a primitive and often lawless community called Slab City.

To the south, along the Mexican border, are lush, irrigated fields worked by impoverished migrant laborers. To the west is a string of modest housing developments, such as tiny Salton City (pop. 1,000), grandly envisioned as a flourishing resort community in the 1950s and 1960s but now a sleepy backwater that lost boating customers to such freshwater meccas as Lake Havasu in Arizona.

Many points of view

Jurisdictional splits have sometimes caused problems. The sea is divided between two counties—Riverside in the north and Imperial in the south—as well as a pair of squabbling water districts, the Coachella Valley Water District in the north and the Imperial Irrigation District in the south.

In addition, Salton Sea policy pits rural areas against cities and suburbs, upstream Colorado River states against California, and, on occasion, the federal government against state and local interests. However, the

1993 creation of the Salton Sea Authority—a joint entity formed by the two counties and the two water districts—has focused attention on solutions, participants say.

The key question, unanswered for now, is whether the sea can be saved for a reasonable amount of money. The plan attracting the most attention would construct a barrier—such as a dam, dike, or berm—across the lake. Agricultural runoff would be desalinated and sold for profit 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, where it would help preserve a smaller version of today's lake, where 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, as well as a crust of salt that helps keep the seabed from being scattered by the wind. The plan could also enable energy companies to access areas, now under water, where geothermal energy can be tapped. Doing so could boost the state's renewable energy capacity and add jobs in Imperial County, California's poorest.

But the technical challenges are substantial, and the cost may pose problems. "If it turns out to be a \$1 billion or \$2 billion project, it seems like there could be support,"

says executive director Kirk. "If it's \$6 billion, it might bust all the circuit breakers."

Louis Jacobson

Jacobson is a staff correspondent at *National Journal* magazine in Washington and principal contributing writer of *The Almanac of American Politics 2004*.

Drivers Are Paid to Avoid Bridge Construction

In an effort to reduce the number of vehicles crossing the Woodrow Wilson Bridge during five years of road-clogging construction, the bridge project is paying Maryland and Virginia drivers to leave their cars at home and take public transit or join van pools.

The pay-to-ride program, dubbed "Bridge Bucks," is designed to remove as many as 1,000 vehicles from travel lanes within the construction zone at a cost of \$745,000 for the first year.

"We spent a couple of years tapping the best minds in transportation demand management," says John Undeland, a spokesman for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project. "When we realized how dispersed the origination and destination patterns are in the bridge corridor, we decided to focus on the demand side of the equation rather than the supply side. Our goal is to empower the individual commuter," he says.

Bridge Bucks, announced in January, was open to the first 1,000 commuters who qualified—500 each from Maryland and Virginia. The two states are sharing the cost of the program. To qualify, drivers had to pass through part of the 7.5-mile project corridor in their normal commute to work or school. Once enrolled, participants receive \$50 a month in bus or rail passes. In the case of van pools, the funds are sent directly to van pool operators.

Undeland notes that a recent poll of commuters showed that a \$50 monthly incentive was enough to sway 32 percent of respondents to consider transit or vanpools and 22 percent to switch. After just five days into the program, Bridge Bucks had received 500 applications and half had been approved.



Salton Sea Recreation Area on the east side of the sea, while visitors from around the country. The visitors were guests of the U.S. State Department.

