Salton rescue plan praised

Salinity seen as key issue

By Jennifer Bowles
The Press-Enterprise

DESERT HOT SPRINGS

Extracting more than 9 million tons of salt a year from the Salton Sea is the primary goal in a long-awaited rescue plan released Thursday by the U. S. Department of the Interior to enthusiastic response from lawmakers.

"We have identified an overarching water quality problem that needs to be dealt with now if we are going to save the Salton Sea," Acting Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes told federal and state lawmakers at a symposium in Desert Hot Springs.

"This is not to say there aren't other water quality issues," he said, "but the one that is driving the decline of the sea is the increase in salinity."

The sprawling sea that straddles Riverside and Imperial counties is now 25 percent saltier than the ocean. If it jumps to 35 percent, Hayes says, "we would lose the ability to save the sea."

Calling the sea "the last stand" for birds that migrate along the Pacific Flyway, Hayes said it is a national resource worthy of protection, much like the Florida Everglades.

"There are many demands for our funds, but we have to make decisions about what makes sense and this is an area that deserves investment," Hayes said.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein praised the report that culminated 18 months of scientific research on the troubled sea, plagued by periodic fish and bird die-offs.

"This is a breakthrough day," Feinstein said. "These are options that are probable.

"While the report listed five possible solutions for removing the salt, they all carry common elements that would be implemented immediately: improving recreational facilities, shoreline cleanup, wildlife disease control and establishing wetland habitat on the north shore."

The differences are in the costly system for reducing the sea's saltiness.

One system of misting towers and another similar to a series of snow-blowing machines would, in effect, suck up the salty water and spray it into the air where it would evaporate, allowing the dried salt chunks to fall to the ground. Another option calls for building evaporation ponds, where the salty water could

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be concentrated.

Even though the 18-month study failed to pinpoint one specific solution, Hayes was happy with the five options noted in the draft environmental impact statement. A 90-day public comment period will follow before one of the five options is selected in the spring.

"We would have loved to come out and say this is the silver bullet to fix the Salton Sea," Hayes said. "In this 18-month time frame we didn't find the silver bullet but we found very important answers to basic questions that tell us that we've got to stabilize the water quality salinity problem right now."

The salt concentration is high because the sea is fed only by irrigation and sewage runoff and it has no natural outlet. To reduce the salinity from 44,000 parts per million to 35,000 ppm, some 9.4 million tons of salt would have to be removed each year, said Bill Steele, project manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

Each option noted in the report comes with a hefty price tag ranging from $319.5 million to $542.5 million over a 30-year period. In the second phase, which stretches over 100 years, that amount could reach $1 billion.

The Salton Sea Authority — a regional agency made up of water districts and lawmakers from Riverside and Imperial counties, and the Bureau of Reclamation — has $8.5 million from last year's budget to begin building prototypes of the enhanced evaporation systems. Those should be operating within six months, Hayes said.

Although Feinstein assured those attending the symposium that she will fight each year to fund restoration efforts, she said a significant chunk would have to come from California. In Florida, for instance, the $7.8 billion rescue plan for the Florida Everglades is being split 50-50 by the state and federal government.

State funding for the Salton Sea has been lackluster so far. Assemblyman Jim Battin, R-La Quinta, secured $1 million in a 1998 budget request and $2 million last year. Before that, a water bond measure passed by voters in 1996 approved $2.5 million.

"The point I have always made is if the Salton Sea was in downtown LA, it would be Perrier water because there's a lot of legislators that represent it," Battin said. He pointed out that only he represents the Salton Sea area in the state Assembly, and only Sen. David Kelly in the Senate.

But if California voters pass Prop. 12 on March 7, the park bonds measure would give $5 million to the sea restoration. In addition, more money could come out of an $82.5 million in additional Prop. 12 money that would match federal and local agency funding for nonprofit organizations that buy, restore or protect habitat areas that help the recovery of threatened or endangered species, Battin said.

So far, the Salton Sea restoration program is the only project officially listed as a recipient for that money, he said.

"There are other projects that will compete for that money but they're not already cleared for those dollars," Battin said. "We won't get all $82.5 million but there's a lot of money we have an opportunity to get at."

Carrie Rosema / *The Press-Enterprise*

David Hayes of the Department of Interior speaks about restoration of the Salton Sea during a symposium in Desert Hot Springs.

Battin said he has tried to convince fellow lawmakers to help California's largest lake by dubbing the Salton Sea "Tahoe South."

Feinstein said a huge federal budget surplus this year should help her to convince colleagues to fund the sea's restoration efforts.

The symposium, she said, "hammers home the point that restoration of national habitats like this one should never be a partisan issue.

"If we work together across the aisle and across the two houses, we will in fact have an appropriation that is adequate through the years to see that the necessary work is done to revitalize the Salton Sea."

Responding to the Democratic senator, Rep. Kevin Calvert, R-Riverside, said, "We're all united in moving this forward. It's probably not as fast as any of us would like, but we have in hand a list of recommendations and assuming they work, we need to know what it would cost and to move forward as soon as possible."

But Feinstein said she will continue to press questions about cleanup efforts for the New River, which flows north from Mexicali into the sea, carrying with it untreated sewage from Mexicali.

Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine, said marshes are being built along the river that will act as filters for that sewage. A new treatment plant is near completion, he added.

Feinstein also wanted to make sure that potential commercial and industrial uses for the leftover salt would be looked into.

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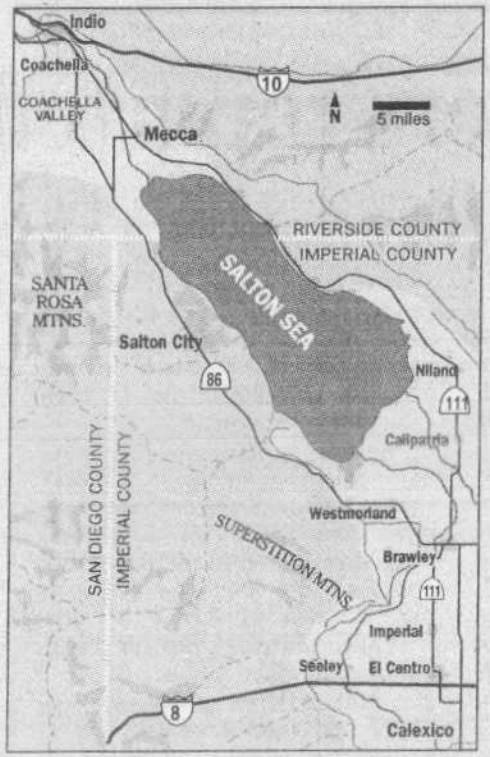
Saving the Salton Sea

The U.S. Department of the Interior on Thursday unveiled five possible courses of action to rescue the Salton Sea. Each approach differed only in the desalinization component. Work will commence in two phases: renovation and rescue programs between 2003 and 2015. Injection of new water will come after 2030, as deemed necessary.

The four goals:

- Maintain the sea as a place for farm runoff.
- Provide a safe, productive environment for birds and endangered species.
- Restore recreational uses.
- Enhance opportunities for economic development.

Sources: Salton Sea Authority and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation



The details

All approaches include:

- **Fish harvesting:** Catching and processing large quantities of tilapia to decreased the nutrient level and reduce fish population. **$2 million**
- **Recreation facility fixes:** Repair roads and boat ramps; deepen waste channels for boating. **$2 million**
- **Shoreline cleanup:** Remove dead fish and debris; maintain shoreline. **$500,000**
- **Wildlife disease program:** Multi-agency cooperation in monitoring and studying wildlife die-offs.
- **North wetland habitat:** Preservation of islands and living areas for wildlife. **$15 million**

Optional improvements:

If the sea level drops severely over time . . .

- A displacement dike would reduce the sea's surface area and retain current depths. **$450 million**
- Colorado River flood waters would be diverted into the sea. **$10 million**

But each plan has a different desalinization component:

	Grand total* (in millions)
Plan 1: An evaporation pond ($424 million)	**$443.5 to $903**
Plan 2: An enhanced evaporation system ($300 million)	**$319.5 to $779.5**
Plan 3: An enhanced evaporation system ($424 million)	**$443 to $903**
Plan 4: Onshore enhanced evaporation ($409 million)	**$428.5 to $888.5**
Plan 5: In-sea enhanced evaporation system ($300 million)	**$542.5 to $1,002.5**

*The higher grand totals include the two optional improvements shown in the box above.