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**EPA: Draft environmental report on Salton Sea is inadequate**

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 Breaking News Sections

DARA AKIKO WILLIAMS, Associated Press Writer

(05-17) 09:37 PDT SAN DIEGO (AP) -- Preserving the Salton Sea for fish, birds and water enthusiasts will take more than reducing the salinity as suggested by a draft environmental impact statement, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said in a harshly worded report.

In a 28-page report dated Monday, the EPA called the Salton Sea draft environmental impact statement "inadequate" for using speculative language in describing potential ways to reduce salinity and for not including more studies on the affects on the lower Colorado River basin and delta.

"We believe restoration efforts must utilize a wide range of approaches to address the multiple complex and unusual problems of the sea," the EPA report said. "We question whether the narrowly defined project would result in a feasibly sustainable viable ecosystem as stated in the project's goals and objectives."

The draft EIS, which was issued by the Salton Sea Authority earlier this year, examines five different ways to reduce and control the salinity in California's largest lake, which is 25 percent saltier than the Pacific Ocean.

"Even with implementation of proposed restoration actions; salinity, surface elevation, and ecological goals may not be met. We believe there is no assurance the project will meet its objectives, even after a significant expenditure of effort and resources," the EPA said.

The EPA also said the report focuses too narrowly on the issue of salinity, fails to give detail on water quality standards, doesn't evaluate how reaching some goals may have

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adverse affects on other restoration plans and is inconsistent in handling inflows over time.

William Steele, the Salton Sea program manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, said he expected the EPA to be critical but was surprised that the draft EIS was called inadequate.

"I think some of it was the differences of opinions on the guidelines from Congress and the Department of the Interior versus what the EPA thinks we should be doing," Steele said Tuesday.

"It's not a kill to the project or anything. There's still plenty of time to work it all out," he said.

Steele expects to meet with the EPA within the next few months to resolve some of the agency's concerns.

Federal officials warned in January that the sea's ecosystem will die unless 9.4 million tons of salt are pulled from the lake each year. The process could cost up to \$9.5 million annually for at least 30 years.

The sea sits about 225 feet below sea level and with no natural outlet, the salinity continues to rise because evaporation is the only way water escapes.

The Salton Sea, located northeast of San Diego in the high desert, is home to millions of fish and is an important habitat for migratory birds but is also the site of mysterious and massive fish die-offs and bird kills.

The EPA's report comes as the 60-day comment period on the draft EIS expired Tuesday.


A final EIS will likely be completed early next year.

On the Net: The Salton Sea draft environmental impact statement:

<http://www.lc.usbr.gov/7/8saltsea/pub--info--mat.html>

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