

Salton Sea rescue mobilizes

Task force: Rep. Sonny Bono, allies seek \$5 million to head off environmental disaster.

By **JIM SPECHT**
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — While President Clinton has vowed to spend \$50 million to preserve Lake Tahoe, members of Congress are scrambling for \$5 million to help restore California's largest body of water, the Salton Sea.

Federal officials are galvanizing to look for a solution to save the 35-mile-long sea after decades of neglect have allowed it to become the drainage point for 500,000 acres of farmland and a sewage-laden river from Mexico.

"I watched the president at Lake Tahoe and thought, 'If we could only make the public aware of the potential environmental disaster we are facing at the Salton Sea, they would rush to help us, too,'" said U.S. Rep. Sonny Bono, whose district takes in the north end of the sea. "But Lake Tahoe is just beginning to see problems.

"The Salton Sea is going to die very soon if we don't do something."

A congressional task force led by Bono, R-Palm Springs, and Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-San Diego, has persuaded the House of Representatives to approve \$6.4 million in funding for 1998 to pay for research to study solutions to revive the sea. They also obtained federal operating money for the first time for the local Salton Sea Authority.

HEARINGS IN OCTOBER: Task force members will be featured witnesses during joint hearings by three congressional committees planned for early October in the Coachella Valley and Imperial County.

Cleanup plans

Among options for revitalizing the Salton Sea:

- Pumping salty water from the sea 35 miles south to the Sea of Cortez and pumping less-salty ocean water back to replenish the sea.
- Diking off a portion of the sea and using it as an evaporation pond.
- Building a canal that would provide an outlet for the sea south to the Sea of Cortez.

Rep. George Brown, D-San Bernardino, a task force member, said the hearings by the Resources, Science and Agriculture Committees should help focus national attention on the plight of the sea.

PRIORITY ON RESEARCH: U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials also have placed a priority on research, planning to begin a comprehensive study to determine what engineering solutions might help stop massive fish kills and the deaths of thousands of waterfowl.

A combination of months of 100-plus degree days, which cause the water to evaporate rapidly and leave behind metals and salts, and the lack of any outlet river has left the sea 20 times as salty as ocean water.

Because the sea was created by accident — when the Colorado River broke through a man-made channel in 1905 — the huge body of water often has been treated as an impoverished orphan by state and federal agencies.

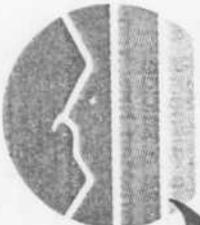
But it has become one of the principal stops for 4 million migrating birds that use the Pacific Flyway, said Donald Voros of the Fish and Wildlife Service's western region office in Portland, Ore.

"It's clear we can't just walk away from the Salton Sea just
See SALTON/A5

SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 1997

FRONT PAGE

SERVING THE COACHELLA VALLEY SINCE 1927



The Desert Sun

SALTON

Continued from A1

because it was an accident," he said. "We need to preserve the role it is fulfilling as a migratory habitat and look into the resource it could be for eco-tourism."

Five teams of scientists will look into the research that has been done on the sea and determine what still needs to be done to fill in gaps over the next week, Voros said.

The goal is to develop a computer model that will show how proposals for reducing the salinity and pollution could affect the ecosystem.

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Whatever solution is selected will involve complicated cooperation between federal, state and local officials — and probably cooperation with Mexico because the pipelines to the ocean would have to cross the border.

It is essential to bring Mexico into the negotiations, anyway, said Brown, because a third of the water flowing into the sea comes from the New River, which is now heavily polluted with untreated sewage from the city of Mexicali.

"We're spending \$100 million for a treatment plant to clean up that pollution—and the Mexicans may want to keep that water once it is clean," Brown said. "That would be a disaster worse than Owens Valley — you'd have blowing salt flats with high levels of pollution, with the wind carrying it right into the Imperial Valley."

That could make the demise of the Salton Sea a national disaster, he said, because the rich agricultural region in the valley provides much of the winter vegetables throughout the United States.

Cost estimates range wildly, from \$200 million for a single outlet pipeline to \$1.75 billion for the pump-in, pump-out plan.



Leita Cowart/The Desert Sun

On the water: Seagulls glide over the water at the Salton Sea.