

Salton Sea rescue plans to be aired

► Federal officials will offer five options at a symposium in Desert Hot Springs.

By Jennifer Bowles and Onell Soto
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Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes today will offer federal lawmakers a review of the options scientists have proposed for saving the Salton Sea, rather than a specific recommendation, officials said Wednesday.

Hayes will make the long-awaited announcement at a two-day symposium in Desert Hot Springs attended by Sen. Dianne Feinstein and members of the Congressional Salton Sea Task Force. The task force had expected a solution by now.

"It has always been the intention of the task force to seek a preferred solution so that legislation could be introduced incorporating the specific recommendation," said Frank Cullen, a spokesman for Rep. Mary Bono, R-Palm Springs.

Bono co-chairs the task force, made up of four Inland area lawmakers, that was founded by her late husband Sonny Bono. Before his death he had made rescuing the sea a priority.

A 1998 law — named the Sonny Bono Salton Sea Restoration Act — set aside money to study California's largest lake, which straddles Riverside and Imperial counties. The Salton Sea Authority and the Bureau of Reclamation, an agency under the Interior Department, had a Jan. 1 deadline to come up with a rescue plan.

While some of those involved say

the law required a specific course of action to be set by that deadline, others say it did not. Regardless, a detailed plan would help task force members in Washington, where they will have to persuade lawmakers from across the nation to approve spending millions of dollars to save the salty sea, which has been hit by massive fish and bird die-offs.

"Generally speaking, Congress is not going to deal in generalities when it comes to funding projects," Cullen said. "They want specifics and how the money will be spent and a timetable for the completion of the work."

But instead of a specific plan, Hayes will outline five possibilities and give the public three months to comment on them before settling on a preferred plan, according to Tom Kirk, executive director of the Salton Sea Authority.

"Under the best of circumstances I would have liked a preferred plan," Kirk said. "At the same time this is a complex issue and we have a lot of the pieces together, and it's a matter of finalizing those."

All five options, Kirk said, are designed to clean up the shoreline, improve wetlands along the edge of the sea, establish a program for diseased wildlife and attack fish die-offs by removing huge numbers of the lake's fish.

The differences lie in the system proposed to reduce the sea's salinity.

The options include a system of misting towers or something similar to a snow-blowing machine, to suck up the salty water and spray it into the air where it would evaporate. The dried salt chunks would then fall to the ground. These options

could be blended with evaporation ponds, where the salty water could be collected.

The options will cost between \$300 million and \$1 billion.

"They're going to recommend the public have a chance to review everything," said William J. Steele, Salton Sea Program Manager for the Bureau of Reclamation.

Next week, Steele expects to deliver to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency a 500-page study analyzing the effect of all the projects on the environment. A 90-day public comment period will begin once a notice is printed in the Federal Register.

The final environmental impact study, expected in the spring, will contain one proposal for addressing the problems of the sea, Kirk said.

That would be before the Oct. 1 budget deadline when Congress allocates funding for fiscal year 2001.

The Salton Sea was created in 1905 when an engineering mistake caused the Colorado River to blast through an irrigation canal and fill the sump that is now the sea.

Fed only by irrigation and sewer runoff, the sea's salinity has risen more than 25 percent higher than that of the ocean. It has, however, become an important stopover for migratory birds as coastal wetlands have shrunk by 80 percent.

Those attending the two-day symposium will be given an executive summary outlining the cleanup options.

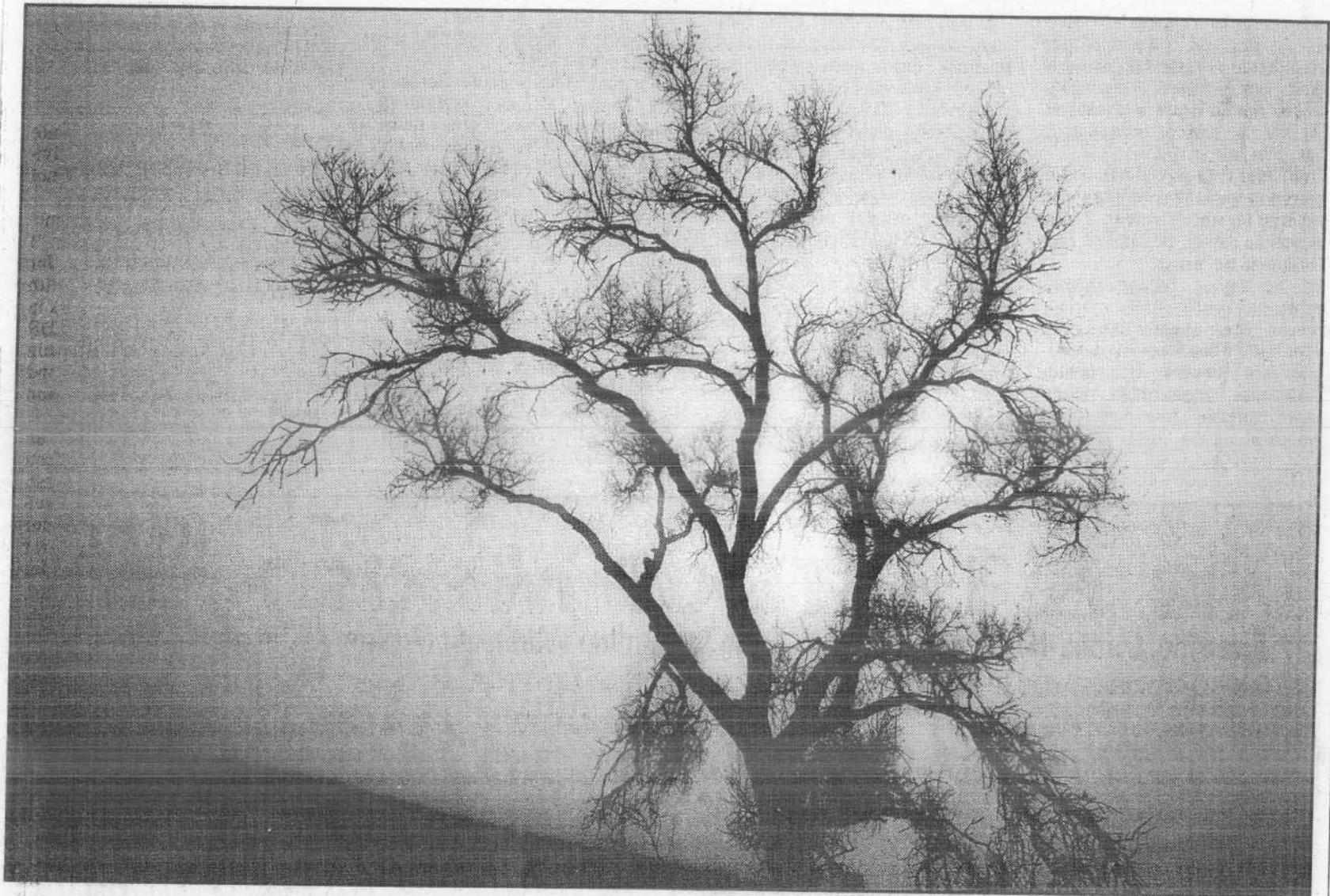
"We have a good set of actions and possibilities," Kirk said.

Jennifer Bowles can be reached by e-mail at jbowles@pe.com or by phone at 782-7720.



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Veiled light



The glow of Wednesday's sunrise through thick fog in the Temecula Valley silhouettes an oak tree near Fig Street and Jefferson Avenue.

Thomas Kelsey / *The Press-Enterprise*