BRIEFING STATEMENT

PREPARED FOR: **STATE: CA**
SUBMITTED:

TITLE: Salton Sea Resource Values

ISSUE: Ecosystem Health

Continuing disease problems occurring at the Salton Sea have killed over 200,000 birds since 1992, including endangered CA brown pelicans and an estimated 15% of the Western population of American white pelicans. Massive fish die-offs have also occurred on a regular basis. The Salton Sea ecosystem is suffering with repercussions to endangered species and migratory waterfowl. Without any changes the entire ecosystem is likely to cause continued large scale wildlife die-offs with significant effects to many bird populations on the Pacific flyway.

BACKGROUND/STATUS:

The Salton Sea is California's largest lake, stretching 35 miles in Southern California, one of the driest regions in the United States. Average rainfall is less than 3" a year in the area. As a result the Sea has become a virtual oasis for resident and migratory bird species. The additional agricultural habitat on the north and south ends of the Sea attract a variety of birds which utilize both the Sea and agricultural habitat. This creates one of the most diverse avian habitats in the United States, where more than 380 bird species have been recorded.

Due to the high number of bird species found around the Salton Sea, the area has developed a tremendous following by avid bird watchers from all parts of the world. A study by Paul Kerlinger (1994) found that 54,000 bird watchers spent $3.10 million in the area while observing birds in and around the Salton Sea.

Since the loss of an estimated 94% of California's wetlands, the Salton Sea has become increasingly important for the Pacific flyway. Over 110,000 ducks and up to 25,000 snow, ross' and Canada geese migrate to the Salton Sea to winter every year. A total of 37 different species of waterfowl utilize the Salton Sea and surrounding marshes and agricultural fields.

In addition, the Salton Sea's shallow bays and mud flats attract large numbers of migrating shorebirds. The area has been shown to be particularly important for Western sandpipers, dowitchers, black-necked stilts and American avocets. Over 25 species of shorebirds are found at the Salton Sea and peak migration numbers typically reach 105,000 birds using the area. The Salton Sea also provides nesting habitat for the greatest number of Western Snowy plovers in the interior of California. Coastal populations are listed as federally threatened.

The Salton Sea also provides habitat for the only inland nesting colonies of gull-billed terns and

black skimmers. Both species are considered sensitive and nest on the Salton Sea NWR. Caspian terns have also increased in numbers at the Salton Sea and currently have large nesting colonies at the Sea.

Several endangered species rely on the Salton Sea and surrounding habitat for nesting and feeding. The Yuma clapper rail population in the area has grown to at least 400 individuals, which represents approximately 40% of the entire U.S. population of Yuma clapper rails. Numbers of clapper rails have increased on the refuge and surrounding habitats which prove that the area will be vital for the complete recovery of this species.

California brown pelicans have also increased at the Salton Sea over the past 20 years, peaking in the summer months and feeding on the abundant fish resource. Of particular importance is the recent successful nesting of this species on the Sea in 1996 and nesting attempts were made in the winter of 1997. These were the first documented nesting of CA brown pelicans at the Sea and the first inland nesting of this species recorded.

Other endangered species using the Salton Sea include occasional aluetian canada geese, southern bald eagles, peregrine falcons and the desert pupfish.

The Salton Sea provides important feeding and nesting habitat for a great number of other migratory and resident bird species as well. The area provides habitat for the second largest wintering population of white-faced ibis in California. Over 5,000 American white pelicans rely on the Sea for resting and feeding along their migratory route. Colonial waterbirds such as great blue herons, black-crown night herons, great, snowy and cattle egrets all nest in and around the Salton Sea in large numbers.

POSITION OF INTERESTED PARTIES:

Interested parties include: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, CA Department of Fish and Game, CA Department of Parks and Recreation, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management, Torres-Martinez Desert Indians, Imperial Irrigation District, Coachella Valley Irrigation District, agriculture parties in Imperial and Coachella Valleys and private land owners.

All parties would like to see the condition of the Salton Sea improved. Agencies involved with public use want to bring back the sport fishery and increase recreational opportunities. Irrigation Districts and agriculture would still like to use the Salton Sea as a repository for agricultural run-off. Private land owners would like to see stabilized water levels and improved conditions of the ecosystem health, Dept. of Fish and Game would like to see improved environmental conditions for fish and wildlife.

FISH AND WILDLIFE PERSPECTIVE:

The Service believes that the problems associated with the Salton Sea will continue to cause widespread wildlife mortalities without any action. Migratory birds and endangered species are

currently at risk from damaging population reductions resulting from mortalities at the Salton Sea. Some action must be taken to prevent future wildlife mortalities and improve the health of the ecosystem if the Salton Sea is to remain a viable resource for the Pacific Flyway and the multitude of species which rely on it for their continued survival.

CONTACT:

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