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The Ripple Effect

The Salton Sea — California's largest inland lake — presents big opportunities for environmentally sound economic progress.

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PHOTO BY OSCEOLA REFETOFF

The Salton Sea presents a serious threat to the economic and environmental health of the Coachella Valley yet also offers great opportunity.

Perhaps better known recently for its occasional odor than for its fun-filled history as a recreational destination, the sea was born from millenia of floods and drought. Blocked by Grand Canyon sediment flows that washed into the Gulf of California, Colorado River water periodically stormed into the valley to create California's largest inland lake. Located below sea level, the region flooded nearly every 300 years with river water, which then evaporated.

Occasionally, the floods came more frequently than the droughts that dried the sea, which has no outlet to the ocean. From 1824 to 1904, Colorado River flows flooded the Salton Basin at least eight times. A close shave with an irrigation canal dredge in 1905 resulted in the first Colorado River flood of the Salton Basin caused by humans. For nearly a year and a half, the river roared into the sink as the entire might of the Southern Pacific Railroad was marshaled behind a presidential order to close the breach. Humans finally got the upper hand over nature in February 1907, dumping 2 million cubic feet of rock and \$3 million of emergency funding to redirect the river south to the Gulf of California.

Irrigated agriculture in the Salton Basin grew strong from that point forward, contributing a sustaining flow of water to the Salton Sea to this day. Water draining to the lake from the agricultural fields, however, contains salts and minerals that build up as the water evaporates. Its salinity level has risen beyond 1.5 times that of the ocean, making it more challenging to maintain America's largest and most diverse population of migratory waterfowl outside the Everglades.

But recently, the odds of revitalizing this troubled body of water appear to be improving. Calls for the sea's rehabilitation gained momentum this year when local stakeholders pitched Tesla on the area as the ideal site for the company's newest battery manufacturing factory. In addition to diverse and abundant renewable energy to power its factory, the company could capitalize on vast local supplies of lithium, a byproduct of the brine from geothermal activity at the sea.

For decades, the sea has languished as relatively small sums of federal and state money generated studies and reports aimed at assessing the problems and delivering plans to fix them. A comprehensive restoration plan produced by the state Resources Agency in 2007 was quickly shelved in the California Legislature when lawmakers balked at committing to the \$9 billion price tag.

Meanwhile, citizens, business owners, and property managers are increasingly concerned that time is running out to devise a workable, financially feasible plan to revitalize the sea.

At the very least, local residents want to mitigate the negative impacts of the enormous Colorado River water transfers set to accelerate in 2017. The transfers will result in nearly a third of agricultural water bypassing the Coachella Valley and the sea, flowing instead to the coastal areas of San Diego. The sea shoreline will recede, stranding wildlife and exposing potentially dusty soils on the lake bottom. Weather conditions could stir up the dust and blow it toward the resort communities, which rely on golf tourism.

Realizing it could no longer wait for outside interests to solve a local problem, the Salton Sea Authority mobilized to identify financial resources that can be harnessed as part of the long-term solution to recover the sea's essential values.

Over the past two years, local leaders have labored to deliver commitments to capture and direct local resources toward sea revitalization efforts. Their vision: an environmentally healthy and economically vibrant Salton Sea.

Almost two years ago, a storm roaring up from the Sea of Cortez churned the Salton Sea sediments, releasing a foul odor that blew all the way to Los Angeles and the Simi Valley. The smell was a wake-up call to millions of Southern Californians — they could no longer ignore the Salton Sea.

Federal officials met with local stakeholders a few months later to pledge their support for change. This time, it wasn't only a couple of politicians running for re-election or a bureaucrat delivering a feel-good speech. Every agency head and elected official who matters at the sea — federal, state, regional, and local — showed up at its shore and vowed to dig in and work together.

The local agencies were quick to show they meant what they said, unveiling a set of unifying Guiding Principles and Platform for Legislative Action adopted by the authority's directors. Member agencies from Imperial County and Imperial Irrigation District turbocharged the effort with a bold memorandum of understanding called the "Salton Sea Restoration and Renewable Energy Initiative," which set aside a divisive lawsuit and created a cooperative mission to develop local economic solutions to the environmental challenges.

U.S. Department of Interior officials accepted a challenge from Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit to define cooperation beyond vague generalities. A year later, the Salton Sea Authority signed an MOU with Assistant Secretary of the Interior Ann Castle, along with representatives from the Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Among other provisions in the MOU is agreement to pursue land transfers where feasible. One of the challenges in designing a project around the sea — whether it's wetlands benefiting wildlife or a renewable energy project that can deliver power to the grid — involves a checkerboard of property ownership. Almost 40 percent of the land around and below the sea is federally owned, so the ability to move some of the checkerboard to create contiguous pieces of land could remove some of the chaos and delay for future environmental restoration and economic development at the sea.

Reinforcing these developments at the federal level is a new commitment by the Army Corps of Engineers, the federal agency that specializes in stabilizing large, complicated wetlands, riparian habitat on a scale like the Everglades or

Chesapeake Bay. Until recently, the Corps' official work plan did not include the Salton Sea. That critical step, along with funding to complete a recon study, is now in the federal budget pending action in Washington.

With help from state Assemblymen Brian Nestande and Manuel Perez and Sen. Ben Hueso, the Legislature passed laws to strengthen the Salton Sea Authority's local governance of revitalization efforts. This was followed by funding to complete a Financial Feasibility Action Plan. This will determine how much revenue an economically revitalized Salton Sea may generate. The Salton Sea Authority signed contracts with the National Renewable Energy Laboratories to secure this information, which is critical to a realistic plan and the public-private partnerships that can sustain it.

Not to be outdone, at the request of the Salton Sea Authority board of directors, Riverside and Imperial counties are engaging private-sector partners to explore an Infrastructure Finance District that could identify and potentially finance infrastructure investments that would stimulate more private investment around the sea.

Local matching funds, potentially through the Salton Sea IFD and other sources, are especially important in light of the state water bond pending passage in November. The Salton Sea shares a pot of \$475 million with several other regions where the state settled a water-rights dispute by offering to mitigate its impacts on the affected areas. In the case of the Salton Sea, the settlement was the Quantitative Settlement Agreement on the Colorado River, which resulted in the largest ag-to-urban water transfer in U.S. history. If voters pass the bond in November 2014, Salton Sea interests will have to secure a fair share of that \$475 million, but the good news is that serious state funding finally would be in play.

It is amazing to realize that just two years ago, none of this was happening. The sea was adrift, slipping toward a sad demise. Today, there is tremendous activity and a sense among local leaders that the Salton Sea can be transformed into an attractive environment and thriving economy.