

Dear Ms. D'Elia and Ms. Beckham,

April 24, 2015

Thank you for your e-mail. We are pleased and very encouraged to learn that the Little Hoover Commission will begin hearings to examine the current conditions at the Salton Sea and to make recommendations. We are providing you with some of our insights regarding the Sea but we also will attend your workshop in Palm Desert.

As you know, the Salton Sea region is suffering from a number of environmental and economic problems, including degradation of air quality due to receding lake levels, increasing salinity that threatens fish and the birds that feed on them, periodic releases of noxious gases, and the deleterious economic impacts imposed by these environmental problems.

The challenges at the Sea need to be addressed with a strong voice and leadership. The California state government must play a role in affirming that the needs identified by local agencies (Salton Sea Authority, Cal Fish and Wildlife) are recognized, endorsed, and addressed. We believe that the challenges faced by the Salton Sea region are important not only to Imperial and Riverside Counties, but also to California, and to the entire southwestern United States. Acknowledgement of the scope of the problem is an important step toward raising awareness of state as well as national priorities on water use.

We advocate for the following actions:

(1) There needs to be immediate implementation of engineering projects (e.g. marsh-building) that will serve to suppress fugitive dust. Three such marsh building projects are the Imperial Irrigation District's Red Hill Bay Project, the State of California's Species Conservation Habitat Project, and the Torres-Martinez managed marsh. We hope that your commission will emphasize the importance of implementing and completing these projects with a sense of urgency. These projects will protect the environment and reduce the production of fugitive dust, but they also serve as proof of concept projects for the larger mitigation projects that will be essential in the future. With managed marshes along its shore that support fish, and open waters rich in invertebrate species, a future Sea can continue to support abundant and diverse populations of birds while protecting public health by minimizing dust.

(2) The southeast shore of the Salton Sea includes a region that is the most productive site in the United States for the development of geothermal energy. Geothermal energy is the most environmentally friendly of the various forms of renewable energy. While solar and wind power have been fast-tracked, another vital, homegrown source of renewable energy -geothermal power- has not received the same attention and support. The State has identified renewable energy production as a vital goal for energy independence and economic development in the future. Financial and regulatory support for geothermal energy would promote this state-wide goal and would provide a stimulus for the economy in the Imperial Valley region.

(3) Small scale desalination efforts in the region would provide a commercial salt product, as well as fresh water for the projects adjacent to the Sea. These desalination plants would tap into excess power production in the region (via solar, wind, or geothermal). The environmental consequences of desalination are negligible at the Sea and would be greatly aided by funding in support of demonstration plants.

It goes without saying that a major concern in the region is the sustainable use of water, including the precious water that comes from the Colorado River. It is important that Colorado River water continue to be used for irrigating the crops of the Imperial and Coachella Valleys. These produce billions of dollars of crops including high quality vegetable, fruit and forage crops that feed the nation. The runoff from these irrigated fields could flow toward the Sea and into constructed marshes designed to support the production of fish and cover exposed beaches, protecting the health of hundreds of thousands of Californians. Some of the water will support local energy production, although renewable energy facilities use vanishingly small amounts of water compared to every form of fossil fuel production. Agricultural runoff to the Sea will stabilize both the level and salinity of the Sea.

Water from the Colorado River will be doing triple duty. It will support agricultural productivity as it has for over a hundred years. Subsequently, it will maintain marshes that provide habitats for the production of fish essential for several dozen species of birds. The sustainable transformation of the Sea will provide abundant renewable energy, protect the shoreline, prevent the release of toxic dust, and protect and enhance the biological productivity of the Sea while providing a diverse and sustainable economic base for the entire region.

There is reason to be optimistic. The benefits to the environment, the economy, and the inhabitants of the region are both substantial and obvious. The region around the Sea can simultaneously be a hub for abundant renewable energy, an agricultural powerhouse, an ecological gem and a vibrant tourist destination that benefits us all.

These are our views on the current state of the Sea and a productive and sustainable future for the region. We thank you for seeking our input and we would be glad to speak with you or communicate further at any time.

Sincerely,

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