

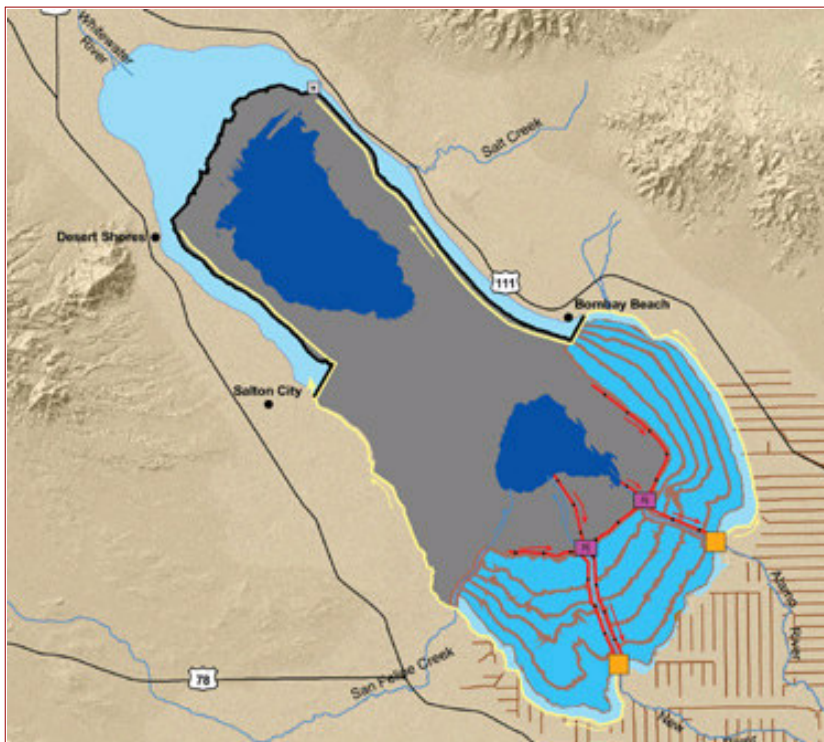
Printable version: Thursday, March 29, 2007

## 1. WATER: Calif. resource officials offer \$6B Salton Sea alternative

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

The California Resources Agency this week unveiled a new preferred alternative design for restoration of the Salton Sea in Southern California that will try to combine many of the most desired elements of several plans that had been under consideration. Not only would the new plan try to preserve a recreation-oriented marine sea at the northern end of the Salton Sea, it would also greatly increase the size of a salt-water wildlife habitat on the south end to accommodate migrating birds that use the sea as a stopping point along the Pacific Flyway.

Initial reactions from stakeholders were generally positive. However, as the agency finalizes details of the proposal for presentation to state lawmakers by the end of April, questions linger about the feasibility of some design features and the sources of funding for what is expected to be a \$6 billion, 70-year process to correct deteriorating environmental problems at the huge inland sea ([Land Letter](#), Oct. 26, 2006). It appears likely that there will be continued lobbying at the Legislature for revisions to any final plan.



Following a five-month process of public vetting of eight alternatives, Resources Agency Secretary Mike Chrisman described the new plan as a combination of several options. "We promised a composite of the eight alternatives that came about as a result of an extended public dialog and making sure we fulfilled legislative directions," Chrisman told *Land Letter*. "We did a lot of listening to various constituencies."

Among major considerations that derived from the comments process were strong support for maintaining water near communities, a large recreation area and wildlife preserves. These coincided with fundamental requirements for protecting fish and migrating birds that use the sea.

At the same time, however, there remains strong sentiment for maintaining the sea as a repository for agricultural runoff and to minimize salty dust that adversely affects farming in the region.

California officials this week released a long-term plan for restoring the inland Salton Sea to environmental health. This image illustrates how the sea would be configured by the year 2078. Courtesy of the Department of Water Resources. Click on the image for a larger version of the map.

While praising the agency's effort to find consensus, Julia Levin, state policy director of Audubon California told *Land Letter* that the selected alternative may be three times as costly as the option that had been rated best on

environmental grounds.

The agency, she said, "is presenting a plan with a lot of positive features, but it may not be a plan the public is willing to pay for. We all want to make sure a restoration plan moves forward. We can't afford to have no plan."

## A complex design emerges

While some designs under consideration involved splitting the sea's basin in half with a sea wall or establishing "concentric rings" of shoreline, marshlands and lake, the preferred alternative appears even more complex than that.

At the northern end, a 34,000-acre marine sea of about 35 feet in depth will wrap around the periphery of the existing sea basin, walled off from the interior by a 42-mile long barrier. This design tries to maintain water access points at popular sites including Desert Shores, Salton City on the western shores all the way to Bombay Beach on the eastern side.

A 62,000-acre saline habitat complex is like a horseshoe capping the southern end of the basin, with two saltwater canals and pumping stations drawing brine out of the basin to desalting plants.

Almost half of the 234,000-acre basin will be given over to exposed playa, or seabed surface, surrounded by an extensive canal system to provide sprays to mitigate dust. There also will be two brine sinks totaling 29,000 acres in the center of the seabed (see image above).

"We think there's a lot to this proposal," said Rick Daniels, executive director of the Salton Sea Authority, which had been advocating its own design that would have split the sea into two parts. "It gives us the best of both worlds: a large habitat in the south and a large sea in the north." The authority's priorities were to maintain water recreation and fishing while at the same time create new tourism opportunities via a wildlife refuge.

There are some changes to the state's proposal that the authority would like to see, Daniels told *Land Letter*. These would include a relatively small lake or reservoir in the south and some habitat in the north adjacent to the Torres Martinez Indian reservation lands. In terms of physical design, Daniels said that the state should consider increasing the surface area of the northern sea by eliminating some of the northeastern waterway from Bombay Beach to Salt Creek. That would allow for a somewhat deeper sea as well as a "wide open" expanse of water for sail boats and Jet Ski use.

But overall, Daniels said, the authority is prepared to advocate the new plan to the 50 or so communities that previously signed up in support of its principles for restoration.

That may be a hard sell in some communities, and even within the group's ranks. Following the release of the proposal, Imperial County Supervisor Gary Wyatt declared the plan "unacceptable" if it does not incorporate a southern lake. "We need to have recreation opportunities for people in Imperial County," he said.

Wyatt also serves as president of the Salton Sea Authority.

Audubon's Levin expressed puzzlement at Wyatt's stance, saying that the authority had not previously pressed for a southern lake and that option was not analyzed in the draft environmental impact report. "To put an entirely new feature, we'd have to do a new EIR. That could set us back by a year or more," she said. The southern end of the sea also has a shallow slope, she added. To put in a lake of any size would require more excavation and more cost.

Levin also questioned the feasibility of shortening the northwestern flank of the marine sea, which would result in deepening the marine sea. A major reason for maintaining a certain depth is to minimize the buildup of hydrogen sulfide, which has been a cause of massive fish kills in the sea. "You can't shorten the length of the arms without increasing the depth of the lake, and that doesn't solve the hydrogen sulfide problem. The depth needs to be less than 12 meters," she said.



A key feature of the preferred alternative plan for the Salton Sea is a large saltwater habitat to accommodate the 400 species of migrating birds that rely on the sea during their annual journeys. Photo courtesy of DWR.