



Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration Program Draft Programmatic

By Kanwarjit S. Dua

Environmental Impact Report Released for Public Review and Comment

On October 19, 2006, the California Resources Agency, in partnership with the Department of Fish and Game and the Department of Water Resources, released the Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Report ("EIR"), which contains eight alternatives and one option of no action for restoring the Salton Sea ecosystem

Background

The majority of water that flows into the Salton Sea is agricultural drain water. Under the Quantification Settlement Agreement ("QSA") signed in 2003 by the Imperial Irrigation District ("IID"), the San Diego County Water Authority ("SDCWA") and the Coachella Valley Water District ("CVWD"), water previously used for agricultural purposes that eventually entered the Salton Sea was redirected for urban use. Under the QSA, the Imperial Irrigation District ("IID") will continue to provide the same inflow levels to the Salton Sea for the next 15 years. However, at the end of the 15 year period, the reduction of flows into the lake will accelerate the evaporation of the lake. This will cause saline levels to increase rapidly, threatening marine and avian habitat, as well as pose air quality concerns for area residents. The lake has no outlet and its saline levels are approximately 30% higher than the ocean and increasing.

Proposed Alternatives

The draft EIR contains eight alternative plans with varying degrees of action as well an alternative of no action. The legislation directed the State Resources Agency to develop the range

of alternatives based on a set of guidelines, including, salinity control, habitat creation and restoration, differing shoreline levels, surface area configurations and different inflow conditions. The Fish and Game Code directed the alternatives to maximize the program objectives, which included maintaining salinity levels, protecting the endangered pupfish, reduce vector issues as well as compliance with other Endangered Species, environmental, water quality and air quality laws.

CEQA requires a "no project" alternative to be evaluated with the other alternatives to facilitate comparison of what would happen if no action was taken. Under the QSA, a number of actions must be taken and facilities must be constructed. These include construction of pupfish connectivity channels and air quality management of exposed playa.

Alternative 1 provides for a Saline Habitat Complex in the southern sea bed consisting of a series of 1,000 acre cells with water depths of less than six feet. Deep holes would be created to protect fish life. The salinity of each cell could vary depending on what fish and/or invertebrate habitat are being provided for. The Saline Habitat would provide habitat for a variety of birds. There would also be pupfish channels constructed. A Brine Sink would exist and would receive runoffs from Salt and San Felipe creeks. Alternative 2 is similar to alternative 1 but would contain more Saline Habitat Complexes. Irrigation of water efficient vegetation would be used to control air quality management issues.

The third alternative would create two concentric rings that would provide moderately deep Marine Seas. Desert pupfish connectivity, Brine Sink and air management elements

would also be included. In addition, all shorelines would have water.

Alternative 4 consists of four separate lakes similar to the Saline Habitat Complex, but without the individual cells. The first lake would contain the pupfish connectivity. The second lake would connect all of the northern drains and Salt Creek. This alternative contains irrigation water supply. Long term irrigation facilities are not provided for in this alternative and therefore long term air quality management practices addressed are not addressed. The lakes would be formed by Geotube® berms.

Alternative 5 would create a deep Marine Sea on the north side of the Salton Sea bed. The Marine Sea would connect to Salt Creek and the northern drains. There would be a Saline Habitat Complex in the south, desert pupfish connectivity, air quality management components as well as a Brine Sink. The pupfish would be in the southern shoreline and would connect to the San Felipe Creek. Alternative 6 is very similar to Alternative 5, but includes a moderately deep sea in the south that connects to a deep Marine Sea in the north.

Alternative 7 was developed by the Salton Sea Authority and combines a deep recreational saltwater lake in the north with a moderately deep recreational estuary lake in the south. In addition to a Brine Sink, air quality management and pupfish connectivity, an 11,000 freshwater reservoir operated by IID is included.

Alternative 8 combines many of the features of Alternatives 5-7, but calls for a moderately Deep Marine sea in the south connected to the Deep Marine sea in the north through the



Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration Program Draft Programmatic (cont.)

By Kanwarjit S. Dua

western shoreline. There would be a large body of water along the western shoreline that would reduce microclimate impacts. Alternative 8 also provides a full range of recreational opportunities as well as habitats for tilapia, marine sport fish, invertebrates and birds.

Conclusion

The current public comment period will last for 90 days, ending on January 17, 2007. At the close of the 90 day review period, the Secretary of Resources will select the best alternative, or combination of alternatives, based on recommendations from the Salton Sea Advisory Committee, interested agencies,

stakeholders and public comment. The secretary will then present the preferred alternative to the state legislature for ultimate approval, implementation and funding.

For more information on the Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration Program, or to view the EIR, go to <http://www.saltonseawater.ca.gov>.