
State Water Resources Control Board

STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD DIVISION OF WATER RIGHTS STAFF REPORT

JULY 14, 2020

SUBJECT

PUBLIC WORKSHOP ON STATUS OF PHASE 1 OF THE SALTON SEA
MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Introduction

This staff report provides information to interested parties who intend to participate in the annual workshop on the status of the Salton Sea Management Program (SSMP) as part of the State Water Resources Control Board's (State Water Board) oversight role of the SSMP. This report provides background information on relevant water right actions to the SSMP, summary of the Salton Sea and its current conditions, recent SSMP actions, and other items related to the State Water Board's oversight role on the SSMP.

Water Rights Order WRO 2017-0134

On October 28, 2002, the State Water Board issued [Water Rights Order \(WRO\) 2002-0013](#) which approved the long-term transfer of water from the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) to the San Diego County Water Authority, the Coachella Valley Water District, and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. On December 20, 2002, the State Water Board issued [Order WRO 2002-0016](#), which [revised Order WRO 2002-0013](#).

On November 18, 2014, IID filed a Petition for Change seeking modification of Revised Order WRO 2002-0013. In May 2015, Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. established the Salton Sea Task Force to identify realistic short- and medium-term goals to respond to potential air quality and ecological impacts resulting from reduced flows of fresh water to the Salton Sea. As a part of the Salton Sea Task Force, the State Water Board regularly monitored and assessed progress on the implementation of the Salton Sea Task Force's SSMP and held workshops on March 18, 2015, January 5, 2016, April 19, 2016, November 15, 2016, and September 7, 2017. On November 7, 2017, the State Water Board adopted [Order WRO 2017-0134](#) amending revised Order WRO 2002-0013 to incorporate additional conditions that set forth specific restoration milestones (see Table 1) to address public health and environmental concerns within [Phase 1 of the SSMP](#).

E. JOAQUIN ESQUIVEL, CHAIR | EILEEN SOBECK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WRO 2017-0134 requires that the State Water Board hold a public meeting during each year of Phase 1 of the SSMP to receive oral and written comment on the status of Salton Sea restoration. The order also requires a report from the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA), due in the 1st quarter of 2020, to identify:

- (i) completed projects and milestones achieved in the prior year;
- (ii) amount of acreage of completed projects that provide dust suppression and habitat restoration, broken down by habitat type;
- (iii) upcoming projects to be completed and milestones to be achieved prior to the next annual progress report;
- (iv) the status of financial resources and permits that have not been secured for future projects;
- (v) any anticipated departures from the dates and acreages identified in condition 24 of the order (see table 1);
- (vi) progress toward development of the long-range plan described in condition 26 of the order, and;
- (vii) in the event an annual milestone shortfall exceeds 20 percent of a year's annual obligation, a plan that will cure the deficiency within 12 months.

WRO 2017-0134 also requires that no less than 50 percent of the annual milestones shall provide habitat benefits for fish and wildlife that depend on the Salton Sea ecosystem.

Table 1: Specific restoration milestones to address public health and environmental concerns within Phase 1 of the SSMP.

Year	Total number of acres of habitat and dust-suppression projects that shall be completed each year (annual milestones).	Report due to State Water Board on progress made toward meeting each annual milestone.
2018	500	First quarter of 2019
2019	1,300	First quarter of 2020
2020	1,700	First quarter of 2021
2021	3,500	First quarter of 2022
2022	1,750	First quarter of 2023
2023	2,750	First quarter of 2024
2024	2,700	First quarter of 2025
2025	3,400	First quarter of 2026
2026	4,000	First quarter of 2027
2027	4,000	First quarter of 2028
2028	4,200	First quarter of 2029

Total acres to be completed by the end of 2019: 1,800.

The Salton Sea

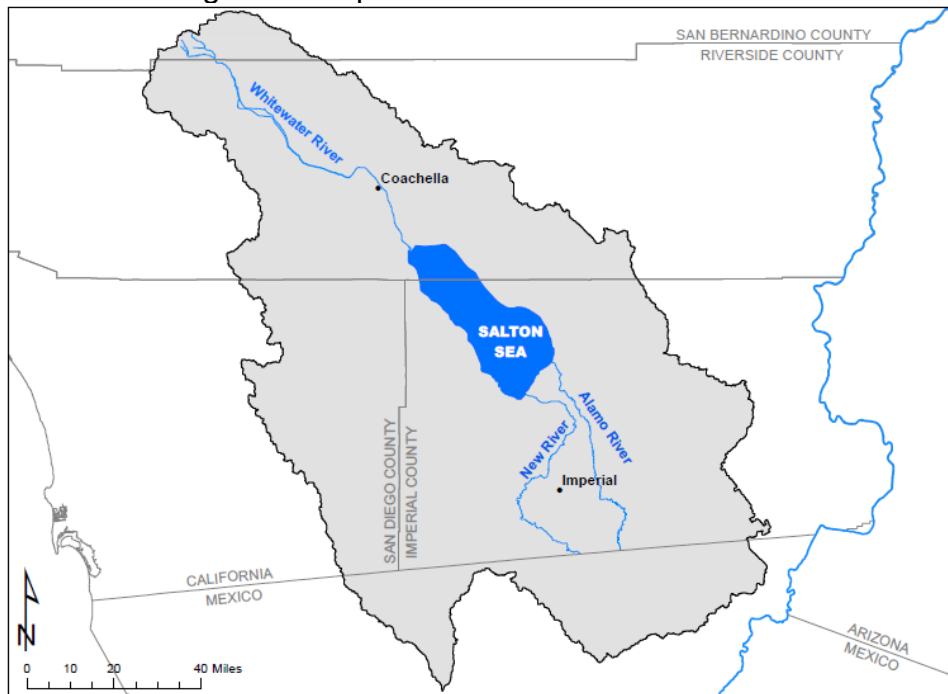
Description of the Salton Sea

Located in the Salton Basin (part of the Colorado River delta), the Salton Sea is California's largest lake, with a surface elevation of approximately 228 feet below sea

level. The Salton Sea watershed encompasses an area of approximately 8,000 square miles from San Bernardino County to the Mexicali Valley. The Salton Sea lies at the lowest point in the Salton Basin and collects runoff and agricultural drainage from most of Imperial County, a portion of Riverside County, smaller portions of San Bernardino and San Diego Counties, as well as the northern portion of the Mexicali Valley (see Figure 1).

Over the last several hundred thousand years, the Colorado River has periodically meandered west to fill the Salton Basin, creating ancestral freshwater lakes that ultimately evaporated away after the river meandered back towards the east. The current iteration of the Salton Sea was formed in 1905 when massive flooding caused the Colorado River to break through an irrigation canal to flow uncontrolled directly into the Salton Basin for 18 months, creating the modern Salton Sea. Once the breach in the irrigation canal was fixed, the Salton Sea has been primarily sustained by agricultural drain water, approximately 80 percent of which flows from the Imperial Valley. As the Salton Sea has no outlets, salts concentrate in it and nutrients enhance the formation of eutrophic conditions. Currently, the Salton Sea has a salinity level that is approximately 50 percent higher than the ocean. The Salton Sea is a critical stop on the Pacific Flyway for migrating birds, including several threatened and endangered species.

Figure 1: Map of the Salton Sea Watershed



Environmental Conditions of the Salton Sea

The environmental conditions are changing rapidly within the Salton Sea watershed caused by water transfers under the [Quantification Settlement Agreement](#) and water management planning within Coachella, Imperial, and Mexicali Valleys. There will be a reduction of inflows to the Salton Sea as time progresses, and it will result in declining

surface water elevations and increased salinity at the Salton Sea. The current conditions of the Salton Sea, provided by the Pacific Institute at <https://pacinst.org/current-information-salton-sea/>, as of July 14, 2020, are as follows:

Salton Sea elevation: **-237.60 feet, National Geodetic Vertical Datum (NGVD) 1929**

Surface water elevation on July 14, 2003 Baseline: **-228.3 feet, NGVD 1929**

Change from 2003 elevation: **-9.45 feet**

Reduction in Salton Sea area: **23,800 acres (37 sq. miles)**

IID Dust Control Projects: **2,100 acres**

SSMP Dust Control Project: **112 acres**

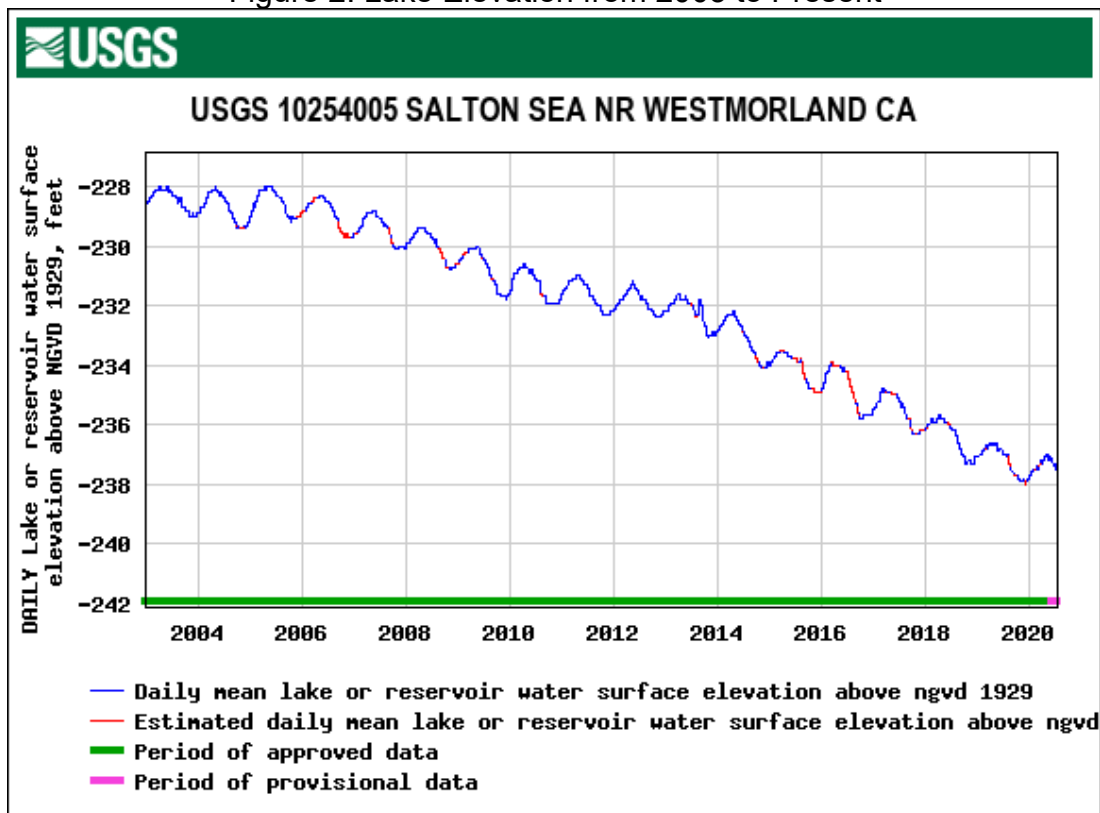
Habitat Projects: **0 acres**

Revegetation atop playa: **4,722 acres**

Net Exposed Playa: **~15,840 acres (25 sq. miles)**

Since 2003, there has been a steady decline in the surface water elevation of the Salton Sea which continued to decline during 2019 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Lake Elevation from 2003 to Present



Data available from: https://waterdata.usgs.gov/ca/nwis/uv?site_no=10254005

Salton Sea Management Program

Structure of the SSMP

The SSMP is implemented by CNRA through the Department of Water Resources and Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). In 2019, staff and management changes

occurred due to the change in administration at the Governor's Office. Notable staff changes include appointing a new Assistant Secretary of Salton Sea Policy, Arturo Delgado, who previously was the Salton Sea Program Manager under DFW. Gail Sevrens filled the vacancy left by Arturo Delgado and is now the Salton Sea Program Manager under DFW. Additionally, CNRA is refining a Community Engagement Plan, in cooperation with community groups, that will guide CNRA's long-term approach to engaging with Salton Sea community members. In conjunction with refining the Community Engagement Plan, CNRA is working to streamline the SSMP Advisory Committee structure by consolidating activities into the Engagement Committee and a Science and Monitoring Committee.

State-Wide Status of the Salton Sea

The Salton Sea is included as part of the [Water Resilience Portfolio](#) released on July 28, 2020 and is identified as one of the ten priorities that the state will focus on to cope with more extreme droughts and floods, rising temperatures, declining fish populations, over-reliance on groundwater, and other challenges. Specifically, the Salton Sea is included under the category to protect and enhance natural ecosystems with the goal to minimize air pollution and restore habitat at the Salton Sea by:

- Supporting achievement of milestones within the 10-year Salton Sea Management Plan to minimize air pollution and preserve fish and wildlife habitat.
- Developing criteria and a monitoring plan to evaluate Salton Sea improvements to local air quality and environmental habitat.
- Completing an independent feasibility analysis of water importation options for the Salton Sea.

Funding for the SSMP

No additional state funding was awarded or granted to the SSMP during 2019, however, the 2020 California state budget includes 47 million dollars to implement Salton Sea projects both in the southern and northern portions of the Salton Sea.

Staff Oversight Activities of the SSMP for 2019

The State Water Board held a public workshop regarding the Salton Sea as required by WRO 2017-0134 on March 18, 2019 and hosted it at North Shore, CA in Riverside County. Written and oral comments were provided by several state and local entities, interested parties, and members of the public. The State Water Board also had an informational item on June 18, 2019 to hear an update from CNRA on outstanding issues that were brought up during the March 2019 workshop.

State Water Board Staff also attended meetings that were held during 2019 related to the SSMP Community Engagement Committee in addition to a committee meeting held on June 17, 2020. Staff also attended the Salton Sea Summit that occurred on October 17-18, 2019.

SSMP Annual Report

The SSMP Annual Report was released on February 24, 2020 by CNRA and is available online: https://saltonseas.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Annual-Report_2-21-20-v3.pdf. The report provides information on actions related to SSMP project delivery, planning, partnerships, community engagement and transparency, and next steps in Phase 1: 10-Year Plan implementation. The report also provides information of current conditions at the Salton Sea and the status of SSMP funding sources. Below is a summary of items and actions described in the annual report:

SSMP Project Delivery

CNRA indicated they are on track to begin construction in fall 2020 on the 3,770-acre Species Conservation Habitat Project, which is anticipated to be completed by the end of 2023. CNRA is also working on a draft Dust Suppression Action Plan for approximately 8,200 acres. The projects covered under the draft Dust Suppression Action Plan are targeted for completion by the end of 2022.

Planning

CNRA continues to work with federal entities in order to complete the permitting process for the entire 30,000 acres identified in Phase 1 and has partnered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to complete a detailed environmental document under the National Environmental Protection Act by spring 2021. CNRA also continues to work with local entities to work toward incorporating local projects such as the North Lake Concept into the SSMP.

Partnerships

CNRA has expanded its collaboration with local, state, and federal entities. Examples of recent collaboration include work with the Salton Sea Authority to rehabilitate and restore boat access to enable continued data collection and monitoring at the Sea, and work with Kounkuey Design Initiative to expand access to recreation at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. CNRA has also been working with entities to develop templates for land access and water availability.

Community Engagement and Transparency

CNRA has re-evaluated and increased efforts related to public and community engagement. CNRA staff participated in multiple meetings with local groups and non-governmental organizations throughout 2019 and early 2020. CNRA also established a comprehensive website (<https://saltonseas.ca.gov/>) to act as the main public information portal for state SMMP activities.

SSMP 2020 Activities (To date)

Bruchard Road Project

As of early July 2020, CNRA completed one on-the-ground project known as the Bruchard Road Project. The project was completed on January 29, marking it the first completed dust suppression project under the SSMP. The project occurred on the southern shore of the Salton Sea and included surface roughening of approximately 112

acres. The project used a ditch plow to create furrows on the surface of exposed playa along Bruchard Road. The furrows are perpendicular to the most common direction of the wind, leaving the ground surface resembling a ruffled potato chip. As wind sweeps over the ground, the furrows slow it down and significantly reduce the amount of dust released into the air.

Dust Suppression Action Plan

In February 2020, CNRA released a draft Dust Suppression Action Plan that identified and prioritized approximately 8,200 acres of dust suppression projects on emissive lakebed locations around the Salton Sea. The plan proposes to implement dust suppression projects in two phases. Phase A includes up to 3,800 acres of surface roughening projects for completion in 2020. Phase B includes establishing vegetation on portions of Phase A project sites, where possible, and implementing approximately 4,400 acres of additional projects in areas that require further data collection, design, and planning and have more extensive environmental permitting requirements. Phase B projects will be implemented as early as possible and a concerted effort will be made to complete identified projects by the end of 2022. CNRA held several public meetings (February 25, February 26, and March 4) on the draft Dust Suppression Action Plan to seek public input and comments on the plan. The plan is available online:

<https://saltonsea.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SSMP-Draft-Dust-Suppression-Action-Plan-022420.pdf>.

Summary

The State Water Board is required to hold an annual workshop by March 31st of each year, however due to the COVID-19 emergency, the workshop set for March 18, 2020 was cancelled and rescheduled to August 19, 2020. CNRA released their annual report in February 2020, prior to the originally planned March workshop. CNRA will present information from their report, and on their progress since the last workshop in March 2019, at the August 19, 2020 Workshop.