

San Diegans for the Salton Sea

NEWS RELEASE

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San Diego Scientists and Environmentalists Speak Out for the Protection of the Salton Sea and San Diego County

SAN DIEGO -- Over one hundred and sixty scientists and environmentalists have united to demand that should the proposed water transfer from Imperial Valley to San Diego occur, it be conducted in a manner that will not unduly harm the natural resources of the Salton Sea and San Diego County.

The Declaration was initiated by "San Diegans for the Salton Sea" an ad-hoc group of San Diego environmentalists and scientists. Individual signers of the Declaration, all from San Diego County, hail from eleven colleges and universities, over 35 environmental organizations, and more than a dozen community-based organizations and research institutions.

"Unfortunately, the participating water agencies involved in the transfer seem to think that environmental laws can and should be skirted in order to facilitate this transfer," said Kevin Doyle of the National Wildlife Federation. "As it is currently structured, the transfer has the distinct ability to harm the Salton Sea ecosystem and induce growth in urban San Diego that would further imperil its unique and rich assemblage of natural resources."

"The signers of this declaration include many of the most informed individuals in San Diego on the environmental dangers posed to both people and wildlife by the water transfer," said Dr. Stuart Hurlbert of the Center for Inland Waters at San Diego State University, a founding member of San Diegans for the Salton Sea. "They understand the big picture and the need for more thoughtful long-term planning. Free of financial interests and of political

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pressures of any sort, they probably represent the long-term quality-of-life interests of the people of San Diego better than any other entity."

The Salton Sea, a 367-square mile lake in Imperial and Riverside counties in southeastern California, supports over 400 different bird species — approximately two-thirds of all bird species in the continental United States — and is considered one of the most important stopover points for migrating birds in the Western United States. Part of the reason for its significance today is the loss of approximately 90% of California's wetlands that took place during the last century, as well as the degradation of the Colorado River delta in Mexico.

Among the immediate concerns for the Salton Sea is its rising salinity. If continued unchecked, the increasing salinity levels will ultimately make the Sea unable to support its vibrant fishery, a vital food source for the thousands of fish-eating birds.

In addition to the fish and bird-life losses that would likely result, the consequences of the current proposed transfer could have dire impacts on the Imperial Valley economy and create conditions similar to the Owens Valley air quality disaster. Modeling by the Salton Sea Database Program at the University of Redlands suggest that the Sea's level would be lowered by as much as 26 feet, exposing up to 120 square miles of lake bottom. The Owens Lake bottom, exposed when Los Angeles diverted the Owens River in the early part of the last century for urban expansion, subsequently resulted in severe and toxic dust storms which caused asthma attacks, aggravated bronchitis, and reduced the ability of residents to fight infections.

Signers of the Declaration believe that the Salton Sea ecosystem must continue to support its incredible diversity of bird species and its world-class sport fishery, as well as other recreational opportunities such as birding and hunting. To that effect, the group maintains that any transfer of water must avoid or fully mitigate impacts to the Sea's bird and fishery resources and must not degrade the air quality in the Salton Sea region or undermine efforts to eventually restore the Salton Sea.

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Declaration signers also believe that any transfer of water must avoid or mitigate negative impacts to the natural environment of the areas that are to receive the water, especially the growth-inducing impacts in San Diego.

San Diego County is considered a hotspot of biological diversity and contains more threatened and endangered species than any other county in the continental United States. The County supports over 380 rare and sensitive species, nearly 40 of which are listed as endangered or threatened, and a unique assemblage of vegetation communities, including coastal sage scrub, chaparral, riparian habitats, oak woodlands, vernal pools, grasslands, and coastal salt marshes. The principal causes of species endangerment in San Diego, as elsewhere in California, are the direct destruction and fragmentation of habitat.

In southern California, where water is imported and where there is significant political will to beckon population growth under the guise of economic development, it is historically true that any increase in water availability or water supply reliability has consistently been growth-inducing. "While it may be considered desirable to establish a more reliable water supply," Doyle said, "it is recognized that improved reliability encourages and induces growth. This has been obvious throughout the developmental history of southern California."

The proposed water transfer is considered by some to be the linchpin of the California 4.4 Plan, the mandatory reduction of California's draw of Colorado River water to its annual legal entitlement of 4.4 million-acre feet by the year 2015. The signers of the Declaration maintain that it has not been established that the transfer is even necessary to meet California's 4.4 Plan obligations, given the many options available to San Diego County for water reclamation, water conservation, desalination, and lowering its population growth rate.

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