Salton Sea Species Conservation Habitat Project
Stakeholders Meeting
UC Riverside, Palm Desert

October 19, 2010

Changes to the Species Conservation Habitat (SCH) Team

Kim Nicol is now the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) Regional Manager and will remain involved in the SCH Project, but she has delegated a number of day-to-day responsibilities to Leslie MacNair until a permanent replacement for Kim can be hired. Additionally, Kent Nelson has been hired by the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), to be a full-time Program Manager for the Salton Sea program.

Previous Action Items

Previous action items were described:

- SCH has been confirmed as a Period 1 activity (previously identified in the May 2007 Salton Sea Preferred Alternative Report and Funding Plan as activities such as construction of Early Start Habitat, filling some remaining data gaps, and the collection of additional biological and physical data and that would occur during the five-year pre-construction period).
- The Restoration Fund Update was posted and emailed to Stakeholders and other interested parties.
- A concept draft of the Financial Assistance Program (FAP) application was emailed to Stakeholders for comment.
- The June Selenium Workshop draft technical report was posted on the DWR website (www.water.ca.gov/saltonsea).

Current Status of Salton Sea

The current status was reviewed with respect to salinity, water elevation, bird disease and numbers, fish die-offs, fishery, and pileworm and barnacle populations.

An overview of SB 51 was presented, which establishes a new governance body called the Salton Sea Restoration Council.

Financial Assistance Program

The types of activities that will be funded will be clear in the guidelines. The target release date of the FAP Proposal Solicitation Package (PSP) is March 2011, proposals will be due in May 2011, and the notice of awards will occur in October 2011. Three million dollars a year will be available, but this is not a continuous appropriation—the State agencies have to ask for funds each year. Forty million dollars are now available

from Proposition 84, but not all funds are available to the FAP. The new Salton Sea Restoration Council will be able to advise how to spend these funds. No maximum amount for solicitations is set at this time, but a method will need to be developed to do this after the pool of applications has been reviewed.

EIS/EIR Scoping Process

The scoping process and comments received from agencies and the public were reviewed and posted to DWR's Salton Sea website.

Alternatives Development Process

The rationale for developing the six action alternatives that are now under consideration was reviewed. Considerable discussion focused on the use of river water (which is composed of drain water) rather than water directly from those drains that flow directly into the Salton Sea. Sites near the New and Alamo rivers were selected because they could provide a reliable water supply; drains would not have the ability to provide a consistent, reliable water supply for the 75-year Project duration; plus, there are other water quality considerations, and the drains are considered habitat for desert pupfish.

The lead agencies understand that the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California has water rights applications on the New and Alamo River and that the Whitewater River is fully appropriated. Discussions regarding the water rights needed to use drain water are pending. A discussion of the legal factors involving water rights will included in the EIS/EIR.

Modeling has shown that it is not feasible to create saltwater ponds through evaporation; there are selenium risk issues, and trying to find the optimum retention time would be difficult with evaporation.

Even though the areas around the rivers are shallow, the SCH ponds need to be in proximity to a reliable water supply. If areas were too deep (i.e., required structures tall enough to impound water deeper than 6 feet at the toe of the berm), the SCH Project would fall under the jurisdiction of DWR's Division of Safety of Dams with more stringent engineering requirements. Material would be excavated from the upslope side of the proposed ponds to create deeper fish refugia. The excavated material would be used to create the berms that would define the perimeter of the ponds.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has proposed the development of shallow habitat at Red Hill Bay, which also is a portion of one of the proposed SCH Project sites. Coordination between the SCH agencies and USFWS will help avoid any overlap of project boundaries. The two projects are seen as complementary.

The alternatives have been refined based on considerations such as the following:

- The Whitewater River sites were eliminated due to lack of available, reliable water supply and land access issues due to tribal ownership.
- Open channel conveyance of water for the ponds was eliminated due to the required large dimensions of the conveyance facilities and the associated magnitude of potential impacts on agricultural and other resources.
- Selenium treatment, if necessary, would be located near the point of diversion.
- Sediment removal is included in each of the Project alternatives. This requires the construction of settling ponds/detention basins.
- The Project is being designed so that the agricultural drains don't enter the ponds directly due to pupfish and water quality considerations. The Project should be designed so it does not interfere with agricultural drains (e.g., along the proposed pipeline route).

Selenium Management Update

The Project team described the approach to selenium management for the SCH Project: identify target species at risk of selenium exposure (sensitive receptors), characterize sources and concentrations of selenium, assess potential ecological risk for sensitive receptors, develop management measures and mitigation to reduce ecorisk, and consider water treatment if necessary and practicable. Findings from two expert workshops were summarized. The Selenium Treatment Technologies Workshop reviewed all applicable methods for treating water to remove selenium, acknowledged the difficulty in achieving very low levels of selenium, and pointed out that many methods would be cost-prohibitive for the amount of water needed for the SCH ponds. Biological treatment, such as constructed wetlands, was not eliminated on a cost basis, but questions remain on its effectiveness and potential for selenium risk at the treatment wetlands.

The Selenium Management Strategies Workshop reviewed the potential risk and measures to reduce it. It is not possible to eliminate selenium ecorisk entirely, but it might be possible to reduce or otherwise manage it to minimize significant impacts on sensitive receptors. By comparison, the potential risk under the SCH Project would be much less than observed at the historic Kesterson Reservoir in the San Joaquin Valley. Options under evaluation include using water with lower selenium concentrations, interrupting pathways for bioaccumulation, and minimizing exposure by sensitive species.

It was suggested that a cost comparison be made between treatment technologies and mitigation. It may be cheaper to acquire land and water to mitigate impacts from selenium exposure than to treat for selenium. It would be difficult and costly for farmers to reduce selenium loading in water before it drained off the fields.

Schedule Update

The revised Project schedule was presented and discussed.

USGS Salton Sea Science Office Activities Update

Lee Case presented an overview of a number projects that are underway or soon to be underway, including:

- Salton Seismic Imaging Project
- LIDAR Project
- Planned collection of imagery data
- Desert Landscape Conservation Cooperative
- USBR Monitoring
- Monitoring and Assessment Plan update
- Red Hill Bay habitat creation (and the desire that this project be complementary and not duplicative of State efforts).