

SALTON SEA ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

January 20, 2004
Golden State Museum, Large Classroom
1020 O Street
Sacramento

Meeting Summary

Opening remarks and committee logistics

Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman welcomed Advisory Committee members to the first meeting of the Salton Sea Advisory Committee and thanked them for their willingness to serve on the committee. After the introduction of members (list of those present is attached), Linda Adams, Department of Water Resources Interim Director, introduced DWR and Department of Fish and Game staff that will be working on Salton Sea ecosystem restoration.

Senator Denise Moreno Ducheny also made opening remarks, and discussed the possibility of using a staged approach for restoration of the Salton Sea ecosystem. She indicated that overall cost should not be a concern or constraint when developing alternatives.

Jeanine Jones (DWR) reviewed logistics for future meetings and reimbursement of members' travel expenses.

Presentations

Jeanine Jones reviewed the State legislation (SB 277, SB 317, SB 654) that implemented the Quantification Settlement Agreement and created new State liabilities and responsibilities for QSA mitigation and Salton Sea ecosystem restoration. The legislation expresses intent that "...the State of California undertake the restoration of the Salton Sea ecosystem and permanent protection of wildlife dependent on that ecosystem". The State assumes liability for QSA mitigation costs in excess of \$133 million, and the QSA local agencies are relieved from future funding responsibilities for Salton Sea restoration. The Resources Secretary is to complete an ecosystem restoration study, in consultation with an Advisory Committee and the Salton Sea Authority, by December 31, 2006. Monies in the Salton Sea Restoration Fund managed by DFG are to be used for implementing conservation measures to protect fish and wildlife resources dependent on the sea, within the lower Colorado River and Salton Sea ecosystems.

Kim Nichols, DFG, presented an overview of the region's fish and wildlife resources. The sea's ecosystem is highly diverse with over 400 species of birds, 10 species of fish, 3 species of macro invertebrates, and over 400 species of zooplankton and phytoplankton. There are more than 50 special status species at the sea and its environs, including the surrounding agricultural lands. Diseases, water quality, salinity, and contaminants are issues of concern for the fish and wildlife. Results from two years of recent surveys showed the fish population to be significantly

decreased from prior surveys. Kim indicated that it was not clear what factor(s) contributed to the decline.

Tom Kirk (Salton Sea Authority), Mike Walker (U.S. Bureau of Reclamation), and Rey Stendell (U.S. Geological Survey), presented an overview of past efforts to restore the sea, focusing on work funded pursuant to the 1998 federal legislation. Their efforts included long-term restoration planning, scientific research, pilot projects, and public outreach. Since 1998, USBR has appropriated about \$17.2 million for Salton Sea activities (including \$3-\$4 million for the New River wetlands). The Salton Sea Science Office has focused much of its research effort in understanding the limnology of the sea and ecological studies of the fish and wildlife, especially in response to the fish and bird die-offs of the late 1990s. Doug Barnum (USGS) demonstrated a geographic information systems-based atlas for the Salton Sea developed at the University of Redlands. The software provides three dimensional model views of the watershed and links to technical abstracts developed through the Science Office.

Roundtable comments

Advisory Committee members were asked to share their thoughts about restoration. Secretary Chrisman expressed his intent that the Committee assist the Resources Agency in the next few months in establishing a good framework – development of ecosystem restoration objectives and of a range of alternatives to implement those objectives – for moving forward with analyses. The ensuing discussion also included members’ questions about specifics of Committee activities.

Defining restoration

Members discussed the importance of identifying what we mean by restoration and what will be used as the baseline conditions. Do we want to have a freshwater lake, a marine environment, or wetland and saltflat habitats? There was discussion about the different objectives of the 1998 federal legislation and of the SSA as contrasted with the objective of the new State legislation, and the respective roles of the State and of local agencies. One member noted that we are not performing ecosystem restoration (returning the ecosystem to an earlier condition and then leaving it alone) but are actually pursuing ecosystem rehabilitation (establishing a desired condition and then intensively maintaining that condition in the face of changing future circumstances). Since the sea has historically changed and will continue to change in the future, our evaluation will need to establish future no-action conditions [for California Environmental Quality Act purposes] and the conditions we want to maintain. Adaptive management will be important, with one member noting that “nature bats last”. Several members expressed a desire to have the restoration objectives in the federal legislation incorporated into this program, while other expressed concern about going beyond the scope of the State legislation. It was suggested that restoration actions be coordinated/integrated with those in the pending habitat conservation plan/natural communities conservation plan for the QSA water transfers as well as with those in the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Plan. Some members felt that cost should not be a consideration in developing a restoration plan (design it and it will be funded), while others cautioned that we should not design a plan that assumes substantial federal funding.

Members expressed a variety of thoughts as to restoration visions/objectives/goals:

- ◆ A vision that the whole sea could survive, and that people would go water skiing there again.
- ◆ Having fish and wildlife resources sustained at historical levels
- ◆ Fish and wildlife resources must be preserved
- ◆ Commitment to the surrounding ecosystem, including habitat values on agricultural lands
- ◆ Importance of including the whole Colorado River Delta in the restoration process
- ◆ Restoration should include local economic development and protecting local economies
- ◆ Restoration should include the objectives from the 1998 federal legislation (e.g. recreation and local economic development), not just those in the State legislation
- ◆ Simple ecosystem restoration approaches are usually preferable to complex approaches that require much human intervention
- ◆ We need to define an approach that is realistically sustainable

Advisory Committee role/activities

Several members requested more detail on the Advisory Committee's role, including a timeline for its activities and details of near-term work activities. Members thought that the Committee process should be open and interactive, with information being published and readily made available. It should not be a process that consumes members' time, but stays focused on a shared vision. The Advisory Committee needs to understand how activities/funding of others such as USBR and SSA relate to the State's process. The process should move quickly and not re-do the previous work performed pursuant to the 1998 federal legislation. Members asked that future meeting dates be scheduled as far in advance as possible.

Other points raised by members

- ◆ This is our last best hope for saving the sea and its wildlife resources
- ◆ There is inherently no permanent Salton Sea restoration solution -- we're working uphill against Nature
- ◆ It is important to listen to the local entities, including cities and geothermal power interests.
- ◆ USBR and USEPA want to cooperate and provide technical assistance in implementation of the State responsibilities. New congressional authorization would be needed for federal participation in a restoration solution.
- ◆ Water quality constituents in addition to salinity – specifically nutrients and selenium – need to be addressed.

- ◆ Air quality is a major health concern to local communities. Restoration impacts must be mitigated.
- ◆ The sea is a complex and dynamic system. Science and monitoring will be needed to establish the status and trends of the natural resources.
- ◆ Rapid local population growth will affect agricultural lands and some areas around the sea
- ◆ There is need for sustainable development on Tribal lands
- ◆ It is a given that the sea will change in the future, if only because of the QSA water transfers

Wrap-up and future meetings

Secretary Chrisman wrapped up by the meeting by emphasizing the need to define “restoration” and noting the importance of the Salton Sea area and surrounding agricultural lands for birds migrating on the Pacific Flyway.

He expressed hope that he would see some of the Committee members at the optional tour of Salton Sea bird habitat being arranged by the Water Education Foundation on February 18-19, and promised to provide dates for the next series of Committee meetings shortly. The next regular meeting will be March 23rd in Sacramento, location to be determined. That meeting will be focused on defining fish and wildlife restoration. To facilitate rapid dissemination of information, meeting materials will be distributed electronically.

Attendance

Advisory Committee Members

Fred Cagle, Sierra Club
Celeste Cantu, State Water Resources
Control Board
Michael Cohen, Pacific Institute
Dan Cooper, Audubon California
Kim Delfino, Defenders of Wildlife
Karen Douglas, Planning and Conservation
League
Lori Gray, U. S. Bureau of Reclamation
Rick Hoffman, Riverside County
Andy Horne, Imperial Irrigation District
Gary Johnson, Colorado River Regional
Water Control Board
Al Kalin, Imperial County Farm Bureau
Al Loya, Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla
Indians

Mark Nichols, Cabazon Band of Mission Indians
Larry Purcell, San Diego County Water Authority
Tom Raftican, United Anglers of Southern
California
Steve Robbins, Coachella Valley Water District
Bernard Shanks, U.S. Geological Survey
Dennis Underwood, Metropolitan Water District of
Southern California
Dan Walsworth, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
John Wohlmuth, Coachella Valley Association of
Governments
Nancy Woo, U.S. Environmental Protection
Agency
Gary Wyatt, Imperial County