SALTON SEA ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

June 8, 2004
9:30 – 3:30
Sacramento

Meeting Summary

Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman welcomed Advisory Committee members and led introductions of those present (list attached). He noted that much of the day's agenda focused on discussing ecosystem restoration considerations and addressing baseline conditions for the No Action Alternative.

Jeanine Jones, Department of Water Resources, announced that CH2MHILL had been selected to provide consultant support for the ecosystem restoration study and programmatic environmental impact report. The contract is expected to be finalized by the end of this month.

Kim Nicol, Department of Fish and Game, provided an update on the status of DFG fish monitoring at the Salton Sea. The sampling found 18 tilapia and no corvina or croaker. The next sampling will occur in July; DFG has ordered hydro-acoustic equipment to assist in finding more fish. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's report on pileworm abundance, requested by DFG, is expected in July. In response to a question as to the cause for the declining fish population, Kim replied that the lack of long-term monitoring data makes any answer speculative. There was discussion as to the meaningfulness of existing salinity monitoring data obtained from varying sources, and whether or not the data showed a trend of increasing or stable salinity. It was asked if anyone was coordinating Quantification Settlement Agreement monitoring work and looking at different monitoring techniques being used by the agencies collecting salinity data.

The Committee will be reviewing assumptions for baseline conditions and the No Action Alternative at upcoming meetings. To introduce this subject, Paul Weghorst of USBR's Denver office presented an overview of assumptions used in USBR's Salton Sea Accounting Model for a baseline with QSA implementation as compared to the earlier baseline used for the State Water Resources Control Board hearings on the Imperial Irrigation District water transfers. He discussed future assumptions that will affect inflows and water quality, including changes in inflow from Mexico, the IID/DWR/Metropolitan Water District transfer, consumptive use in the New and Alamo River wetlands, changes in cropping patterns, future climate change, and drought. Committee members discussed the importance of assumptions about inflows from Mexico, effects from future

land use changes such as urban development on agricultural land, and changes in cropping patterns.

There followed a facilitated discussion among Committee members to go over ecosystem restoration considerations raised at earlier meetings. Facilitator Greg Bourne, Center for Collaborative Policy, opened the discussion with a question that members touched on at earlier meetings – how to most accurately characterize the ecosystem restoration study to minimize confusion about its purpose. A primary point has been that restoration begs the question as to restore to what, since the sea's history has been dynamic. Suggested terminology included ecosystem rehabilitation plan, reclamation plan, preservation plan, sustainability plan, or management plan. A name like Salton Sea ecosystem management plan seemed to encompass many of the points raised by members. The Resources Agency will offer suggested nomenclature at the Committee's next meeting.

The group as a whole also discussed the question of ecosystem/habitat restoration priorities in the area, including habitats/species most important to sustain in the regional ecosystem and habitat priorities for special status species. Comments included:

► threatened and endangered species must be covered.
► it is important to preserve agricultural land for habitat.
► there is overlap with the QSA biological opinion for selected species, and ultimately with the habitat conservation plan/natural communities conservation plan to be prepared – need to look at overall picture.
► geographical scope needs to be defined, are Coachella Valley multispecies conservation plan area, Colorado River watershed in California included?
► need to look at priorities in the context of the Pacific Flyway.
► California Audubon information on avian needs is a good starting point.
► all major habitas are important, establishing boundaries is more important. Start globally (Pacific Flyway), work down to local level. Prioritize unique features that can't be duplicated elsewhere. This watershed is unique because of the synergy of its points.
► Connectivity to Colorado River Delta is important.
► Try to enhance all existing habitats.
► Look for economic opportunities, perhaps we can generate more water to sell. The needs of people/the local economy are important too.
► Area's unique economic features include the large extent of productive agricultural lands that haven't been urbanized, tribal interests, geothermal development.

Committee members were then divided into small groups to discuss the questions shown on the attachment. A summary of the small groups' responses and the ensuing whole group's comments is attached. DFG and DWR will report back at the next meeting on how this input is being used.

Dr. David Meko of the University of Arizona Tree Ring Research Laboratory presented an overview of reconstructed Colorado River Basin hydrology, based on use of tree ring data. Drought conditions/variability of river runoff and their effect on Salton Sea inflows are factors to be considered in developing a No Action Alternative for the ecosystem restoration study. Tree rings records in the Upper Basin allow good estimation of runoff variability through the 1500s, providing a longer time period for consideration as compared to the short period of measured hydrologic data. Conclusions from the analysis were:

- The last four years are arguably drier than any previous 4-year period on the Colorado River back to 1520.

- The "epic drought" of the Colorado River was in the late 1500s. That drought had two multi-decadal episodes of low flows similar in magnitude to those of the current drought.

Next Meeting

Date to be set, expecting early September in San Diego

CH2MHILL is preparing materials for technical workgroup meetings (baseline information for no action alternative, data gaps) to develop information to be presented at the next Committee meeting. Technical meetings with involved agencies and interested Committee members will be scheduled prior to the next Committee meeting. Members will be notified of meeting dates via e-mail.

ATTENDANCE

Advisory Committee Members or Alternates Present

Bernard Shanks, U.S. Geological Survey
Fred Cagle, Sierra Club
Celeste Cantu, State Water Resources Control Board
Michael Cohen, Pacific Institute
Dan Cooper, California Audubon
Kim Delfino, Defenders of Wildlife
Karen Douglas, Planning and Conservation League
Bill DuBois, California Farm Bureau Federation
Bill Gaines, California Waterfowl Association
Bob Ham, Imperial Valley Association of Governments
Rick Hoffman, Riverside County
Al Kalin, Imperial County Farm Bureau
Mark Nichols, Cabazon Band of Mission Indians
Eugenia McNaughton, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Larry Purcell, San Diego County Water Authority
Alberto Ramirez, Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians
Steve Robbins, Coachella Valley Water District
John Scott, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California
Bill Swan, Imperial Irrigation District
Mike Walker, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Dan Walsworth, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
John Wohlmuth, Coachella Valley Association of Governments
Gary Wyatt, Imperial County

ATTACHMENT
Summary of Small Group Discussions

What approaches are most likely to be cost-effective for maximizing habitat values for the optimal number of species (i.e. what approaches would provide the most bang for the buck in terms of number and diversity and species)? Should priority be given to restoration actions that would achieve multiple environmental benefits (e.g. constructed wetland habitat that would improve New or Alamo River water quality at the international boundary)?

- ❖ It is premature to address this now
- ❖ Wetlands creation should be considered around rivers and drainage areas
- ❖ Consider the Salton Sea Authority's (SSA) preferred alternative of dividing the sea into a north and south sea
- ❖ Create replacement habitat upstream
- ❖ Let the sea go hypersaline
- ❖ Priority should be given to special status species and multiple benefits (synergy)
- ❖ Take a diverse approach
- ❖ Need to consider more than environmental benefits – must also include socioeconomic considerations
- ❖ Should not worry about border issues

Comments:

- ✓ It is too early to prioritize
- ✓ Wetlands are of small quantity but good quality

How much does the importance of a habitat type to a particular species affect priorities for preserving that habitat (e.g. burrowing owls/upland habitat, eared grebes/shoreline habitat, white pelicans/deep water habitat, willow flycatchers/riparian habitat)? Are there unique features that should be provided/preserved regardless of the cost of doing so?

- ❖ The question does not appear to reflect the consensus to protect the ecosystem holistically
- ❖ The cost question also assumes we know what funding level we are working with
- ❖ We need to answer the question of how much habitat is needed to provide for bird diversity and abundance
- ❖ Need all types of habitat – deep water, shoreline, agricultural fields, wetlands, etc.
- ❖ To answer this question we need to look at information already complied (e.g. SSA's efforts, the Salton Sea Science Office)

- ❖ Preserve agriculture habitat through purchase, easements, regulatory mandates, etc.
- ❖ Need shallow shoreline habitat
- ❖ Cost will likely be a limitation but should not be considered too heavily at the alternatives development stage

Comments:

- ✓ Need to consider the importance of habitat continuity

What priority should be given to restoration actions providing habitat that supports only a limited number of species (e.g. deep water habitat)?

- ❖ This question has too many unknowns/assumptions, such as: are three species better than 30?; are we talking about type of species vs. quantity/abundance?; it appears to assume habitats are not interrelated with other habitat types.
- ❖ There is no reason to write-off or devalue any habitat type and/or species at this time.
- ❖ Pay attention to past efforts (such as the QSA), and noted relationships (such as impacts of salinity on the brown pelican and selenium on the desert pupfish)
- ❖ Could take a flagship species approach
- ❖ The number of species is not the only consideration - rarity of habitat is more important

To what extent should conservation measures in the Colorado River Delta in Mexico be evaluated? The Salton Sink and the Delta are part of the same ecosystem, and it is important to understand how bird species use/could use both areas; however, the State of California does not have the ability to carry out projects in Mexico absent working through the federal government.

- ❖ This group needs to understand the role the Mexican Delta plays in supporting wildlife also found at Salton Sea
- ❖ We should invite a Mexican biological expert in delta wildlife to present to our group
- ❖ We recommend against committing resources to impact or manage the delta in Mexico

Comments:

- ✓ Part of the Colorado River watershed is in Mexico and Arizona and, as such, presumably outside the study boundary
- ✓ Focus funding on the Salton Sea, not on the delta
- ✓ International implications are worthy to be considered but too complex and complicated
- ✓ Involve experts in educating the Advisory Committee on these issues

- ✓ Consider the approach of "separately but collaboratively" on international issues, e.g., the North American Waterfowl Management Plan evolved from Mexican/United States cooperation at the Federal level

To speed implementation, what high-priority ecosystem or biological restoration needs would be common to any ecosystem restoration alternative, and should be evaluated at a project level of detail for environmental compliance?

High priority needs include:

- ❖ Water supply (agricultural drainage areas)
- ❖ Water quality (TMDLs)
- ❖ Extensive field crops which are flood irrigated - alfalfa, grains, grasses - that are wildlife friendly
- ❖ Constructing wetlands

Comments:

- ✓ Wetlands are a high priority

Funding realities may dictate that phased implementation is necessary. If a phased approach is necessary, what highest priority ecological needs should be met first?

- ❖ Difficult to address funding issues when scope/structure of project not understood
- ❖ "Phased implementation" will nevertheless be likely given revenue inflow and time period for implementation
- ❖ "Highest priority ecological needs" include: 1) maintaining the food base (pile worms), 2) a focus on water quality and 3) a focus on air quality
- ❖ Phasing is inevitable
- ❖ Priorities will change based on monitoring & adaptive management

Comments:

- ✓ We cannot maintain the whole sea, so the SSA alternative deals with that

Partial sea restoration or habitat enhancement alternatives require a paradigm shift in thinking from the previously studied whole-sea restoration alternatives. For example, lands under much of the present sea are owned in large part by the federal government and managed as a drainage repository. If these lands are to be "dried up" as part of a restoration alternative, what future uses should the federal government manage them for? To what extent would these uses be compatible with permanent protection of fish and wildlife resources and minimization of air quality and other impacts?

- If lands were “dried up” they could be managed by the Federal government as wetlands and shallow water habitats, fresh and salt water, which would also abate dust, enhance air quality
- Provide dual goals of addressing air quality and providing habitat
- Question the assumption that the federal government will own most of the exposed land
- What about the quality of lands exposed (e.g. selenium hot spots)?

Comments:

- ✓ “Future use Federal Government will manage for?” SWRCB order will keep people off salt crust since much area will be a dry lake bed - future “uses” have been addressed by State Board ruling -- keep people off
- ✓ Some areas are characterized by “desert pavement,” accessible for 4-wheel drive vehicles

Given that the Salton Sea is a terminal sink, how can we achieve a long-term goal of reducing selenium loading to the sea, to provide for healthy fish and bird populations and to allow removal of human health advisories for fish consumption?

- Selenium problem imported from Upper Basin
- TMDL requirements in Upper Basin should help
- Possible affordable local solutions include: 1) retire high-selenium farmland, 2) New and Alamo River constructed wetlands, and 3) possible mechanical treatment
- Control selenium at its source

Comments:

- ✓ Extensive work occurring at the source in Upper Basin – need to coordinate with those efforts
- ✓ Bioaccumulation
- ✓ Some reluctance to deal solely with selenium
- ✓ Significant deposits in North Sea – “leave alone” is one solution
- ✓ Question about the findings of Bureau of Reclamation – locked in sediments or bio-accumulating?
- ✓ Selenium is higher in the Alamo River than the New River

Privately owned agricultural lands, especially in Imperial Valley, provide very important wildlife habitat in conjunction with the Salton Sea. To what extent should the restoration study incorporate permanent protection of agricultural land uses as part of alternatives, and what is the best way for doing so?

- There may be a role for voluntary actions such as conservation easements
- This will require coordination with local authorities

Comments:

- ✓ Williamson Act addresses this but not necessarily permanent
- ✓ Conservation easements are a useful tool
- ✓ Issue of permanence – it is difficult if not impossible to guarantee without easements
- ✓ The new Farm Bill may provide some tools
- ✓ Need to consult with growers to see what is needed to keep them in business
- ✓ Growers support easements.