

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

September 17, 2019

The Honorable Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chair  
House Natural Resources Committee  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jared Huffman  
Chair  
House Natural Resources Committee  
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Grijalva, and Chairman Huffman:

We write to respectfully request a hearing in the Committee on Natural Resources this fall to examine the roles and responsibilities of the federal government in managing and mitigating the unfolding environmental and public health disaster at the Salton Sea. There are several key issues under federal jurisdiction that we believe should be examined at the hearing and ask that you ensure the responsible federal officials are made available to testify.

The Salton Sea occupies 370 square miles in Imperial and Riverside Counties and is California's largest lake. The Sea provides habitat to over 400 species of birds, including state and federally-listed endangered species. It is sustained largely by agricultural discharges from the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) and Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD). Since the early 2000s, inflows to the Sea have been significantly reduced by voluntary water conservation efforts in the region that have benefitted water supply security in California and the Colorado River Basin more broadly. These efforts have, however, diminished agricultural return flows to the Sea, which has caused serious negative environmental, agricultural and economic impacts in the region.

Since the last Salton Sea hearing conducted by the House Natural Resources Committee on October 3, 1997, the ecological and public health impacts caused by the shrinking Salton Sea have accelerated significantly. For example, salinity levels in the Sea have nearly doubled since 1997, and now hover at a level that has left the Sea poised on the brink of ecological collapse. At the end of 2017, the Salton Sea stopped receiving mitigation water under a prior water transfer agreement, accelerating the Sea's decline. The increasing acreage of exposed lake bed is exacerbating local air quality problems and has negative health implications for residents as far away as Los Angeles. The region is in severe non-attainment with federal air quality standards and has among the highest rates of childhood asthma in California.

In response to these dire conditions, the state of California in partnership with the Salton Sea Authority (SSA) has developed the 10-year Salton Sea Management Program (SSMP), which sets a target of 30,000 acres of habitat and dust suppression projects around the Sea in order to address the most pressing habitat and public health concerns. California has committed \$280 million for this work.

Congress has long recognized the federal interest in the Salton Sea, directing the Department of the Interior (Interior) to develop Sea management plans in federal legislation in 1992 and 1998. Interior is a major Sea landowner and has associated tribal trust responsibilities. The Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians' reservation occupies 2,000 acres at the Salton Sea's north end, while the Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge occupies roughly 35,000 acres at the Sea's south end. Overall, Interior owns roughly forty percent of the Salton Sea. Other federal agencies also have critical roles at the Salton Sea. The Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps) is the lead federal permitting authority for Sea management measures. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed multiple Sea management partnerships with the

state of California, the Salton Sea Authority (SSA), irrigation districts, local government and agricultural producers at the Salton Sea in order address Sea-related resource concerns that threaten the viability of one of our nation's most important agricultural regions.

In order to expedite federal agency engagement in partnership with the state of California, we respectfully request that you call the responsible federal officials to testify before the committee and that they be prepared to address the following issues:

- **Interior** — We ask that Interior testify concerning its work to advance the 2016 MOU commitments; in particular, we ask that Interior be prepared to discuss what steps the Department has taken to establish a multi-year partnership with USDA to develop a robust federal funding source for Salton Sea management. Because it does not appear that significant progress has been made towards the accomplishment of that and the other Interior 2016 MOU commitments over the last three years, we ask that Interior be prepared to describe how the Department intends to expedite its work under this agreement. In addition, we ask that Interior testify to the management of federal land at the Salton Sea and what obligations they have to prevent threats to public health as a result of that ownership. Finally, as the principal water management agency for the western United States, we ask that the Bureau of Reclamation be made available to testify as to how water management policies can contribute to the overall health of the Sea.
- **USDA** — The 2018 Farm Bill contained legislation that authorizes USDA to non-competitively target and expedite funding to expand existing Salton Sea projects supported by the state of California and the SSA, including but not limited to the existing Salton Sea Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Species Conservation Habitat (SCH) Watershed Act project. We ask that USDA be called to testify to describe their progress toward utilizing these directives to benefit the Salton Sea and be able to speak to the role of the Natural Resources Conservation Service in implementing these provisions. The California congressional delegation developed and secured this 2018 Farm Bill legislation, but USDA has not yet taken steps to implement these provisions despite our engagement.
- **Army Corps** — The Army Corps is the lead federal permitting authority for SSMP projects, and also makes critical jurisdictional determinations which impact the speed with which critical air quality mitigation projects proceed at the Salton Sea. While existing SSMP projects are currently permitted, it is important to ensure that permitting for additional SSMP projects proceeds quickly. Likewise, expedited Corps jurisdictional determinations are necessary to ensure that air quality mitigation projects proceed without delay. We ask that the Army Corps be called to testify to describe the steps it is taking to ensure that SSMP permitting and jurisdictional determinations are expeditiously made.
- **Environmental Protection Agency** — In 2017, the state of California submitted a proposal under EPA's Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) to finance infrastructure improvements at the Salton Sea to support Sea management and economic development, which was not approved. We ask that EPA evaluate near-term SSMP projects and New River water quality issues affecting the Salton Sea and describe whether modifications to WIFIA are necessary to ensure that such projects qualify for WIFIA financing.
- **International Boundary and Water Commission** -- The Salton Sea is the outlet for the New River and Alamo River, which each flow north from Baja California, Mexico. The Alamo and New Rivers contribute to the majority of nutrient pollution in the Salton Sea. Scientists have noted that the New River has especially high levels of contaminants. Toxins in the Sea are absorbed by the earth beneath and as the Sea continues to recede, the dust from the exposed playa is swept into the atmosphere, causing our communities to breathe this harmful particulate matter. The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) is the agency responsible for mitigating transboundary pollution across our

border. However, the IBWC has not yet implemented an effective solution for mitigating the inflow of contaminated water in our region, resulting in public health risks for our communities in the Imperial and Coachella Valley. We ask that IBWC be called on to testify to describe the efforts the agency has made to reduce polluted transboundary flows, the steps the agency plans to take to mitigate flows moving forward, and the funding needed to ensure the agency's effectiveness in the region.

In addition, we request that local stakeholders be invited to testify concerning the critical importance of federal investment at the Salton Sea, including individuals who can discuss the public health consequences of lack of federal investment.

We view this hearing as a critical step towards establishing the robust federal-state partnership at the Salton Sea that is required in order to avoid a severe public health and environmental crisis. Thank you for your willingness to work with us toward that goal on behalf of our constituents and residents across the region.

Sincerely,



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JUAN VARGAS  
Member of Congress



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RAUL RUIZ, M.D.  
Member of Congress