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**Hearing on  
Federal and State Efforts to Restore the Salton Sea  
Before the Oceans, Water and Wildlife Subcommittee of the  
House Natural Resources Committee**

**September 24, 2020**

Chairman and Ranking Member, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. I am the Tribal Council Chairman of the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla and a Director on the Salton Sea Authority (SSA).

I offer this testimony on behalf of both the Tribe and SSA.

We view this hearing as the beginning of a more active Congressional effort to drive federal action at the Salton Sea.

The Tribe's reservation is comprised of 2,000 acres in and around the Salton Sea. This is our aboriginal homeland and it must be protected for current and future generations. The Tribe is also a member of SSA, a Joint Powers Authority established to protect public health, the environment and economic vitality of the Salton Sea region.

In addition to the Tribe, SSA is comprised of Coachella Valley Water District, Imperial County, Imperial Irrigation District, and Riverside County.

Our collaborative work together has resulted in significant recent progress at the Salton Sea. For example, we have recently secured \$49 million in new state funding to develop both the New River and North Lake projects at the Sea.

And, through the hard work of Imperial Irrigation District and the California Natural Resources Agency, the nearly 4,000-acre Species Conservation Habitat project will break ground this summer.

I want to make three points in my testimony today.

First, the federal government has key interests and responsibilities at the Salton Sea.

Second, local strategies to mobilize state action provide Congress with roadmap for mobilizing federal action.

And third — in view of the repeated failures by the federal government to take an active role at the Salton Sea — Congress should more directly require federal action.

Our federal partners refusal to testify here today shows why Congress should do so.

Fortunately, this is the approach Congressman Ruiz has taken in his soon to be introduced legislation, the “Salton Sea Public Health an Environmental Protection Act.”

We strongly support this effort.

The federal government is a key partner at the Salton Sea — as a federal land manager, as tribal trustee, and as a caretaker of a resource of national significance.

Interior owns roughly 40% of the Salton Sea, including the Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge. Interior also has trust responsibilities to the Tribe. The Army Corps of Engineers has the lead federal permitting role.

The Department of Defense manages the 357-square mile Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range — a key DOD asset. The Salton Sea region also has significant renewable resources critical to diversifying the nation’s energy portfolio — including the largest known geothermal resource.

Local water conservation efforts play a very significant role in providing water supply security in the Colorado River Basin region — a key national interest.

And, finally the Salton Sea provides critical migratory habitat to over 400 species of birds.

The Trump administration’s FY2021 budget for Interior partially acknowledges the federal role. In the budget, Interior estimates an approximate \$332 million federal legal obligation to mitigate dust exposure on federal lands at the Sea.

This is the cost for bare bones air quality work on those federal lands. Our state and local plans call for more robust restoration.

Given these federal interests and responsibilities, the Committee might ask how we can mobilize meaningful federal action at the Sea.

For over seventeen years, federal and state responses followed a similar course. Restoration plans were drafted, but not implemented.

How did we reverse the state inaction at the Salton Sea?

We adopted firm commitments and mandates.

In 2014, IID petitioned the State Water Board to order the state of California to take action. That led to the development of California’s Salton Sea Management Program. And, in 2017, a State Water Board Order was adopted, establishing specific annual acreage management goals based on the state program.

The mandate drove action after years of inaction.

The Tribe and SSA strongly recommend that Congress adopt a similar directive approach to mobilize federal action.

This is needed because the less directive approach has simply not worked.

Interior has failed to meet the commitments it has made to state and local partners to develop federal funding partnerships, to increase Salton Sea investment, and to create a high-level federal council dedicated to Salton Sea restoration.

In 2018 and 2019, we worked with our Congressional delegation to draft successful legislation for the Farm Bill to expand the federal role at the Sea. We increased USDA conservation funding in that legislation by \$2.6 billion to ensure USDA would have sufficient resources to target funding to the Sea.

Our Congressional delegation then worked hard to secure the support of USDA and Interior to target a very small amount of this new funding to the Salton Sea. USDA has created over 70 conservation initiatives to address concerns quite similar to those at the Salton Sea.

But in the case of the Salton Sea, the federal government again took a pass.

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In closing, it is important to call to the Committee's attention to the fact that the heavy air pollution burdens related to the Salton Sea have left many in our community especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

And the economic impact of COVID-19 on future state budgets is likely to be significant and could make it difficult to accelerate Salton Sea management activities.

In view of these challenges, the Tribe and SSA urges Congress to direct the federal government to act — to fulfill its moral and legal duties at the Sea.

Thank you for this opportunity to present this testimony to the Committee today.