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California's giant, troubled lake is running out of time

Federal funding worries, mining interests and a race against the clock

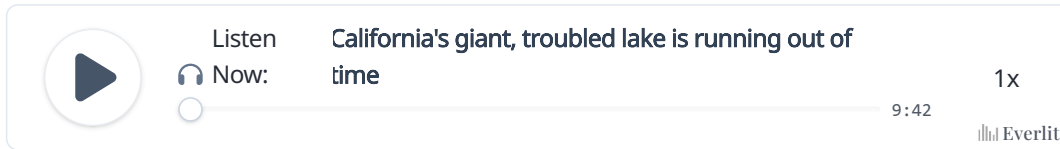


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By **Farley Elliott**, SoCal Bureau Chief



After decades of trial and error, a new plan is taking shape around the Salton Sea, California's largest — and endlessly troubled — lake. The accidental inland sea, some 35 miles long, sprung to life 120 years ago when the Colorado River breached an irrigation canal east of Palm Springs. The sudden, shimmering water briefly created a tourist boom that lasted into the 1960s, though for much of the half-century, the lake could more aptly be described as an environmental disaster zone.



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Now a new wave of conservation efforts, sparked by millions of dollars in recent federal funding, has washed ashore at the ultra-briny sea, and there's cautious hope from some that incoming industry will bring an economic boom.

That is, if it doesn't all fall apart first.

California's strained relationship with the new Republican-led federal regime means that some conservation funding approved under President Joe Biden could dry up faster than the accidental lake itself. And then there's the resource race, a clamoring from both the public and private sectors to extract valuable lithium and underground water from the area as quickly as possible, adding more uncertainty to the delicate ecosystem. A rollback of federally protected areas nearby is already underway.



The Salton Sea, once more popular than Yosemite Valley for its sport fishing and water activities, is the latest in a long cycle of major lakes forming in the Salton Basin through Colorado River

floods and then disappearing through evaporation over the millennia.
David McNew/Getty Images

Time is similarly working against the decaying Salton Sea, thanks to its unique geography. While the most recent iteration of the lake dates back only to 1905, the Salton Basin area has received Colorado River runoff for thousands of years, swelling and drying out in long historic cycles. Prior to the Salton Sea, Lake Cahuilla occupied a portion of the area for more than 1,000 years.

Described as a terminal sea (meaning there is no outflow of water), the lake is rapidly evaporating, increasing the salinity of the remaining water and making life difficult for local populations, both human and animal. The region faces myriad issues associated with the drying lakebed, including toxic dust, poor air quality and increased asthma levels in children. The lake is also a sump, receiving harmful agricultural runoff from nearby farmland. Left unchecked, these issues could eventually make the entire region “uninhabitable,” according to the Salton Sea Authority, a joint management entity that has worked with state officials, federal agencies and local tribes to help guide the troubled lake since 1993.

Recently, help has come in many forms. In 2022, the Bureau of Reclamation, run by the Department of the Interior, announced a plan to turn over \$250 million in federal funds to help “accelerate Salton Sea restoration.” In late 2023, the first \$70 million check landed in Sacramento, with more in line over the next four years. Gov. Gavin Newsom’s office touted the federal-state partnership, saying in a news release that, in part, the money “will be used to expand the state’s Species Conservation Habitat Project, which is creating a network of ponds and wetlands over 4,000 acres to provide fish and bird habitat and suppress dust emissions.” An additional \$2 million was secured for the nearby Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians to help with implementation.



FILE: Frank Ruiz, Salton Sea program director, joins members of Congress, tribal leaders and community advocates at a rally to urge the Joe Biden administration to expand, designate and protect national monuments and sacred lands, on April 16, 2024, in Washington, DC.

Paul Morigi/Getty Images for Monumental Call

In November 2024, California passed Proposition 4, also known as the climate bond, securing \$10 billion for various conservation and climate projects statewide. That triggered \$170 million for Salton Sea restoration, including \$10 million for the creation of the Salton Sea Conservancy, a governing body tasked with oversight of the state's Salton Sea Management Program. Even the bird-loving Audubon Society is pitching in, securing more than 560 acres near Bombay Beach to “stabilize, preserve and enhance an existing emergent wetland.” That project begins in earnest this year.

To recap all that support: A management plan, climate bond funds, environmentalists and a Bureau of Reclamation partnership are all now flowing together to help California’s quickly receding lake, with a state-run conservancy helping to oversee it all.

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“This conservancy is a demonstration of the state’s commitment to meaningful and lasting restoration of this environmentally overburdened region,” said California state Sen. Steve Padilla [last year](#). The state of California and various local agencies and tribal governments now have until January to appoint more than a dozen members to the conservancy, [per CalMatters](#), while ongoing work along parts of the lakebed continues. That includes even more recent habitat restoration for fish and birds that rely on the lake’s [southern wetlands](#) near the community of Westmorland in Imperial County.



FILE: In an aerial view, steam emanates from Controlled Thermal Resources’ Hell’s Kitchen lithium and renewable power plant, the first of several to be built despite the threat of a lawsuit to stall or stop it on Feb. 14, 2024, near Niland, Calif.
David McNew/Getty Images

It’s all happening at a crucial moment for the 15-mile-wide unnatural wonder. Recent geologic studies in the Salton Sea area have uncovered an almost unrivaled cache of lithium, said to be [some 3,400 kilotons](#) — enough to supply 375 million electric vehicle batteries. At full production, lithium carbonate extraction from the area could be worth up to [\\$7 billion per year](#), a staggering sum for an area where nearly 20% of the population [lives in poverty](#). Imperial County, which covers most of the lake, is already calling itself [Lithium Valley](#).

The area's super-heated, subterranean lithium brines could do more than just make money; they could be a potent energy solution, too. The Hell's Kitchen geothermal power plant, to the southeast of the Salton Sea, broke ground in early 2024 and could generate 40 megawatts of power via steam (enough to power thousands of homes) while also separating out raw lithium from brine. The project is not without detractors. Environmentalists recently lost an appeal to halt the approved Imperial County plant, while others say that lithium mining is already harming Salton Sea wetlands.

Legal appeals aren't the only concern for regional boosters. Much of the \$250 million in funding promised to Salton Sea protectors by the Bureau of Reclamation still rests in federal hands, to be doled out in the coming years as the state reaches ongoing benchmarks (like creating and staffing the conservancy). Given the recent defunding bonanza ripping through much of the government, particularly in the nation's ailing national parks and forest service, that influx of money could still shift, though Department of Interior officials say the funds are "obligated" to Salton Sea projects at this time.

"Under President Donald J. Trump's leadership, the Department of the Interior is working to cut bureaucratic waste and ensure taxpayer dollars are spent efficiently," said Bureau of Reclamation Regional Communications Chief Michelle Helms in an email to SFGATE. "Reclamation has announced and obligated \$250 million for the Salton Sea out of the IRA [Inflation Reduction Act of 2022]. To date, \$35 million has been expended. Reclamation is working with the State of California to fund projects as they are initiated."



File: In an aerial view, mud pots and mud volcanoes are seen near the Hudson Ranch geothermal power plant on Feb. 14, 2024, near Niland, Calif.
David McNew/Getty Images

Elsewhere at the Department of the Interior, order No. 3418 — dubbed “Unleashing American Energy” and signed Feb. 3 — offers a glimpse of how the federal government hopes to use America’s public lands. The order “directs the removal of impediments imposed on the development and use of our Nation’s abundant energy and natural resources,” with an emphasis on “encouraging energy exploration and production on Federal lands and waters.”

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Some of that unleashing is already underway. Chuckwalla National Monument, a 600,000-acre desert landscape just northeast of the Salton Sea and south of Joshua Tree National Park, has landed in the crosshairs of the Donald Trump administration. On March 14, federal officials confirmed, and then rescinded, the quiet rollback of protections for the recently designated national monument, which has been described as a geologic

wonder. A day later, the Washington Post confirmed that plans to eliminate the national monument, which was only created in January, are still in motion, much to the consternation of area environmentalists. The Los Angeles Times, meanwhile, spoke to an area councilman who says that, without federal protection, the extraction of valuable groundwater in the area is possible.

Other federal agencies also have a hand in conservation efforts across the region, including the Army Corps of Engineers — which drafted the initial environmental assessment around the Salton Sea Management Program — and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which operates the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge at the southern end of the lake.

With the area so dependent on federal support, and with no guarantees that such support will continue given the often erratic nature of the current administration's operations (plus its not-so-thinly-veiled animosity toward California overall), the Salton Sea remains on shaky soil.

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