



Legislators get firsthand experience with Salton Sea and its challenges

By EDWIN DELGADO, Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, March 17, 2017 1:30 am

More than 40 dignitaries representing an array of agencies and governmental bodies flew in from Sacramento on Thursday to get a closer look at the issues and challenges that are occurring at the Salton Sea.

Members the state legislature, staff from the governor's office, the state water resources board, California Environmental Protection Agency, the natural Resources Agency and others got the opportunity to learn about the decline of the sea as well as the current activities that are taking place.

The dignitaries arrived in Imperial County after 12 p.m. on Thursday and immediately headed to Red Hill Bay, where they got to see the beginning stages of construction of the project there that will create more than 420 acres of shallow ponds to create habitat and suppress dust.

“The main takeaway is that we can no longer neglect the Salton Sea anymore,” said Sen. Jeff Stone, who represents the California's 28th District. “The message today is that it will create a terrible health hazard for people in Imperial County and Riverside County whom I represent.”



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Chris Schoneman, Project Leader at the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge Complex gives visitors an update on the activities that have been taking place at the Salton Sea and talked about the challenges that remain. EDWIN DELGADO PHOTO



During the bus ride to the Salton Sea, the Executive Director of Comité Civico del Valle Luis Olmedo talked to the dignitaries about the public health hazard that is caused by the emissive dust of the receding Salton Sea and the importance of engaging with the local community.

“Overall the Water Foundation did an excellent job convening top-level government officials, legislators and foundations by flying them into Imperial County from Sacramento,” Olmedo said. “The dialogue was productive and while it may not solve the billion-dollar price tag on Salton Sea, I expect it will result in incremental mitigation funding by the state of California and public health will be a major priority alongside habitat and wildlife.”

Once at the Salton Sea the visitors got to listen to the testimony of two different Brawley Union High School students who shared their experience of dealing with respiratory issues within their families or even themselves.

Assistant Secretary for Salton Sea Policy Bruce Wilcox also gave the dignitaries an overview of the activities happening as part of the Salton Sea Management Program and talked briefly about the 10-year plan from the California Natural Resources Agency to cover between 9,000 to 12,000 acres of exposed playa over the next decade. Previously allocated funding is expected to cover the first five years of that plan.

“Overall it was a good day, with the awareness that the legislature now has hopefully we’ll now be able to move forward with funding,” Wilcox said.

Having people that are or will be heavily involved throughout the process makes a big difference because now they’ll have a better understanding of the challenges occurring on the ground. “When you’re able to stand on the playa and kick your shoes and the dust flies off that becomes a pretty powerful message, they got to see that today and I think that will make a big difference.”

To wrap the tour the dignitaries broke in different groups to walk around the boat dock at Red Hill Bay which now is a few hundred feet from the lake.



Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia said the tour was an eye-opening experience for everyone and thought there were plenty of positives from it, however, he said the success of it can only be measured by the legislative efforts that are to follow.

Secretary for the California Natural Resources Agency John Laird is no stranger to the Salton Sea his grandparents used to own 10 acres of land next to the Salton Sea in the '70s. He recognized that much has changed since but is confident that the newly released plan gives the state a solid path to follow for now.

“It will give us the framework and develop momentum and we really have to bring other people into it in addition to what we are doing,” Laird said. “It’s a great start, it’s more than what has been done for decades, but we also recognize that the need today is greater than it has been for decades.”

The next steps to follow are to find the sources of funding for the second half of the 10-year plan released on Thursday. Stone said it is imperative to fund those five years but also work toward identifying the steps that are needed to sustain all of the projects in the future.

“We’ve learned this is not a partisan issue. Restoring the Salton Sea has state ramifications,” Stone said. “...It’s time for us to act as a state and work with our federal partners in gathering the necessary funds to enact the due plan released today.”

After the tour, Garcia, Laird, Sen. Ben Hueso traveled to Holtville to take part of a panel at the Renewable Energy Summit before most of the dignitaries made their way back to the state capital in the evening.

“For them to come here was very eye-opening and educational experience to see exactly what we are talking about every day in Sacramento,” Garcia said.

Staff Writer Edwin Delgado can be reached at edelgado@ivpressonline.com or 760-337-3440.