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Salton Sea work bound to impact air quality

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If the Salton Sea becomes lower, smaller and drier, the air quality of the Imperial and Coachella valleys could suffer. As such, a major issue facing Salton Sea restoration is how to address these potentially significant air-quality impacts.

Recently, some have argued that there will be minimal air-quality problems from exposing the Salton Sea lakebed, and thus there is no need to address air quality as part of any restoration plan for the Salton Sea. I would strongly caution against disregarding air-quality impacts at the Salton Sea.

Indeed, instead of arguing about whether or not there will be impacts to air quality, Salton Sea restoration participants should be focusing on how to restore the sea and, at the same time, ensure that there will be no impact to air quality and the health of Coachella and Imperial valley communities.

Emissions

As the air-pollution control officer for the Great Basin Air Pollution Control District in Bishop and a registered professional civil engineer, I have spent the last 15 years studying dust emissions from the dried beds of Owens and Mono lakes in eastern California. I also have helped develop and implement plans to reduce those emissions to levels that meet the state and federal air-pollution standards.

Both Owens Lake and the Salton Sea contain million of tons of salt. As the waters evaporate, enormous salt deposits are left behind. Although the type and mix of salts at the Salton Sea likely will be more stable than at Owens, at certain times and under certain conditions, the type of emissive surfaces that form at Owens could form at the Salton Sea.

High desert winds are common at both lakes and can deposit the sediments large distances from the lake bed. At Owens Lake, the city of Los Angeles' water diversions caused about 45,000 acres to be exposed and more than 20,000 acres of this area emit dust. About 50,000 acres may be exposed with the Salton Sea water transfer. Even if only a fraction of this amount of exposed sea bed is emissive, there is still the potential for thousands of dust-blowing acres, which will cause increased PM-10 levels.

PM-10 is very fine dust that lodges deep into the lungs and causes health problems, including asthma. PM-10 levels at Owens Lake can be 100 times greater than the federal standard and 300 times greater than the state standard. Even if the peak 24-hour concentrations at the Salton Sea are only a fraction as bad as Owens Lake, the levels could still be many times higher than the state and federal standards.

Several years ago, I was invited to look at the Salton Sea's potential to emit dust due to lowering of the sea's level. I sat on a panel of experts that authored a paper entitled "The Potential for Fugitive Dust Problems at the Salton Sea If Water Levels are Lowered Significantly from Current Conditions."

The type of dust found at the Salton Sea - not just the amount of dust - should be of concern. Sediment analyses at the Salton Sea indicate that dust emissions there could potentially contain more toxic materials

than at Owens Dry Lake, including pesticides and uranium. Some of these elements are known to cause cancer.

Almost a half a million people living in Imperial and Coachella valley communities could face health impacts from the fine dust. In addition, many thousands of acres of valuable agricultural lands could be impaired by blowing salt and sand. This would cause enormous economic impacts to the area.

Economic factors

Also to be considered is the economic impact of dealing with the consequences of air-quality problems when it is too late. By next year, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power will have spent \$415 million to construct, operate, and maintain approximately 30 square miles of dust-control measures on the Owens Lake bed. Los Angeles also will spend about \$40 million per year for operation, maintenance, and purchased water costs to sustain the dust controls at Owens Lake.

As an expert in the air-quality problems caused by the diversion of water from saline lakes, I believe there is no question that the diversion of water from the Salton Sea to the city of San Diego will cause some level of air pollution in the Salton basin.

I urge all parties involved in the Salton Sea restoration to take the necessary steps to ensure that restoration of the sea will include full mitigation to air-quality impacts. The quality of the air we breathe is a serious issue that requires serious attention.

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