STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD
DIVISION OF WATER RIGHTS
STAFF REPORT
April 2026

Annual Public Workshop on the Status of Phase 1 of the Salton Sea Management Program

Introduction

This staff report provides information on the background and status of the Salton Sea Management Program (SSMP) as part of the State Water Resources Control Board's (State Water Board) oversight role of the SSMP.

The staff report is organized into five sections:

- **Section 1: Salton Sea Watershed** provides a description and current environmental conditions of the Salton Sea.
- **Section 2: Water Right Transfer** provides a background and history of water rights order (WRO) 2017-0134.
- **Section 3: Purpose of Workshop** provides a high-level summary of why the State Water Board is holding the workshop.
- **Section 4: SSMP Annual Report** provides an overview of purpose and submittal of the SSMP Team's annual report.
- **Section 5: More Information** provides a link to the State Water Board's Salton Sea webpages and staff contact information.

Section 1: Salton Sea Watershed

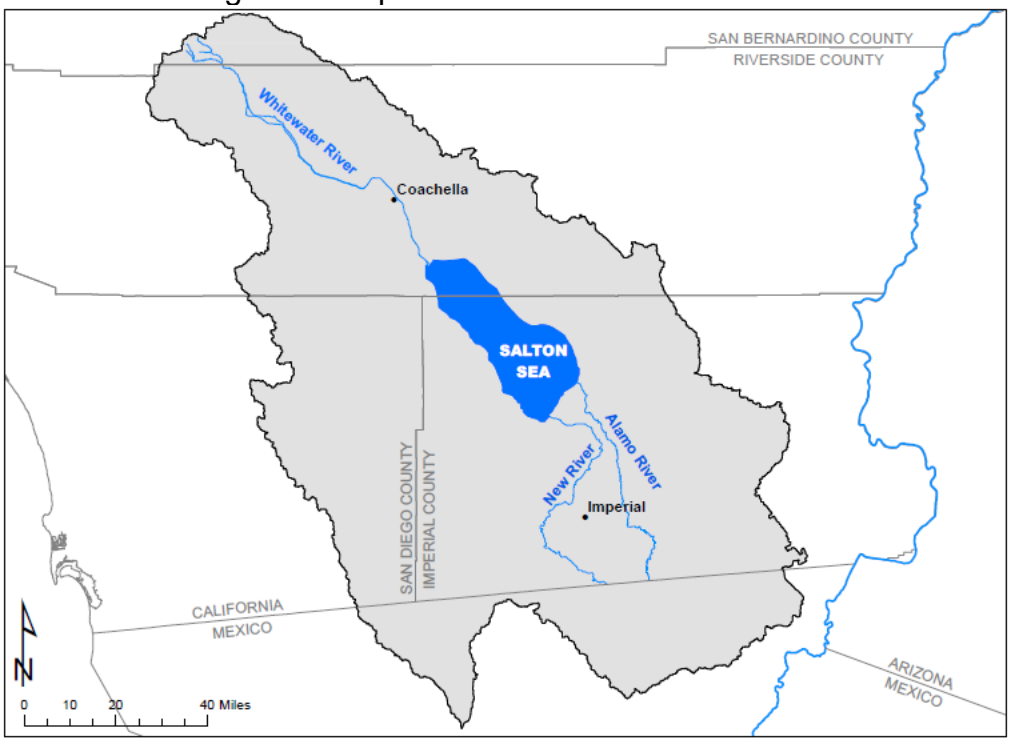
Description of the Salton Sea

Located in the Salton Basin (part of the Colorado River Delta), the Salton Sea is California's largest lake, with a surface elevation of approximately 240 feet below sea level. The Salton Sea watershed encompasses an area of approximately 8,000 square miles from San Bernardino County to the Mexicali Valley. The Salton Sea lies at the lowest point in the Salton Basin and collects runoff and agricultural drainage from most of Imperial County, a portion of Riverside County, smaller portions of San Bernardino and San Diego Counties, as well as the northern portion of the Mexicali Valley (see Figure 1).

Over the past millennia, the meandering Colorado River periodically filled the Salton Basin, creating ancestral freshwater lakes that eventually evaporated. Today's Sea was formed in 1905 when massive flooding caused the Colorado River to break through an irrigation canal and flow uncontrolled into the Salton Basin for 18 months. After the breach in the irrigation canal was fixed, the Salton Sea has been primarily sustained by agricultural drain water, approximately 80 percent of which flows from the farming-heavy Imperial Valley to the south. However, inflow into the Sea has declined over the past several decades, causing the water level to recede. This has led to increased salinity and concentrated nutrients from farm runoff, both of which create inhospitable conditions for fish and wildlife. The Sea is currently more than twice as salty as the Pacific Ocean, and nutrient pollution has caused an overgrowth of algae which are depleting oxygen levels. Many species depend on the Salton Sea ecosystem; it is home to many species of fish and is a critical stop on the Pacific Flyway for migrating birds, including several threatened and endangered species.

Further, receding water levels create public health risks for nearby residents due to air pollution from dust particles released from the previously submerged lakebed. With no natural outlet, decades of agricultural and wastewater accumulation are embedded in the Sea's now exposed soils. Without mitigation actions, more of this particulate matter that contains dangerous pollutants will be released into the air as the Sea continues to shrink.

Figure 1: Map of the Salton Sea Watershed

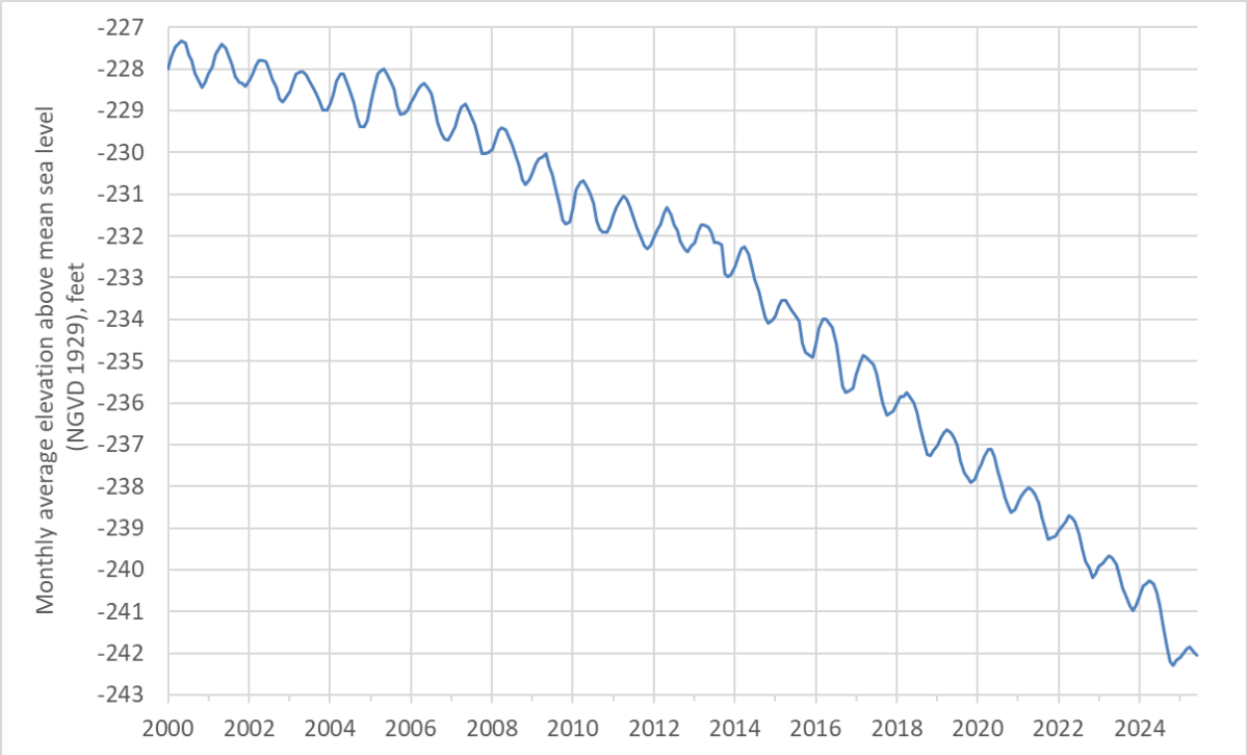


Environmental Conditions of the Salton Sea

As of March 10, 2026, the Pacific Institute states that the current elevation of the Sea is 243.09 feet below mean sea level. This is a drop of approximately 14.6 feet from the 2003 baseline elevation of 228.9 feet below mean sea level. The reduction of Salton Sea area is currently 41,800 acres (65 sq. miles), and there are approximately 24,490 acres (38 sq. miles) of net exposed playa. The Salton Sea is currently shrinking by about 2,400 acres (3.75 sq. miles) each year. There has been a steady decline in the surface water elevation of the Salton Sea, as shown in Figure 2.

Environmental conditions are changing rapidly within the Salton Sea watershed, in part due to natural evaporation that would occur in a terminal lake basin, and in part due to changes in runoff contribution resulting from water transfers under the 2003 Quantification Settlement Agreement and water management planning within Coachella, Imperial, and Mexicali Valleys. While inflows into the Sea have remained relatively stable over the last few years, they remain lower than the evaporative loss from the Sea's surface. Surface water elevations will decrease, and salinity levels will increase in the Sea as a result. Any factor affecting inflows to the Salton Sea will ultimately affect conditions at the Sea; known factors include long-term drought in the Colorado River basin, and changing irrigation and water use practices by Imperial Irrigation District and Coachella Valley Water District.

Figure 2: Salton Sea Elevation from January 2000 to January 2025



Data available from USGS at:
https://waterdata.usgs.gov/ca/nwis/uv?site_no=10254005

Section 2. Water Right Transfer

On October 28, 2002, the State Water Board issued Water Rights Order (WRO) 2002-0013 which approved the long-term transfer of water from the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) to the San Diego County Water Authority, the Coachella Valley Water District, and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. On December 20, 2002, the State Water Board issued WRO 2002-0016, which revised the original Order.

On November 18, 2014, IID filed a Petition for Change seeking modification of Revised Order WRO 2002-0013. On November 7, 2017, the State Water Board adopted WRO 2017-0134 amending revised WRO 2002-0013 to incorporate additional conditions that set forth specific restoration milestones (see Table 1) to address public health and environmental concerns within Phase 1 of the SSMP.

WRO 2017-0134 requires that the State Water Board hold a public meeting during each year of Phase 1 of the SSMP (2018-2028) to receive oral and written comments on the status of Salton Sea restoration. The order also requires an annual report from the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA), to identify:

I. Completed projects and milestones achieved in the prior year;
II. Amount of acreage of completed projects that provide dust suppression and habitat restoration, broken down by habitat type;
III. Upcoming projects to be completed and milestones to be achieved prior to the next annual progress report;
IV. The status of financial resources and permits that have not been secured for future projects;
V. Any anticipated departures from the dates and acreages identified in condition 24 of the order (see State Water Board Table 1);
VI. Progress toward development of the long-range plan described in condition 26 of the order, and;
VII. In the event of an annual milestone shortfall exceeding 20 percent of a year's annual obligation, a plan that will cure the deficiency within 12 months.

WRO 2017-0134 contains annual implementation acreage milestones and cumulative amounts for 2018 through 2028, shown in the table below, including a requirement that no less than 50 percent of the annual milestones shall provide habitat benefits for fish and wildlife that depend on the Salton Sea ecosystem.

Table 1: Specific restoration milestones to address public health and environmental concerns within Phase 1 of the SSMP.

Year	Total acreage of habitat and dust-suppression projects that shall be completed each year (annual milestones).	Cumulative acreage to be completed by the end of each year.
2018	500	500
2019	1,300	1,800
2020	1,700	3,500
2021	3,500	7,000
2022	1,750	8,750
2023	2,750	11,500
2024	2,700	14,200
2025	**3,400**	**17,600**
2026	4,000	21,600
2027	4,000	25,600
2028	4,200	29,800

Section 3: Purpose of Workshop

The State Water Board hosts an annual workshop for the public to review and comment on SSMP activities undertaken over the previous year to help address environmental and public health issues at and surrounding the Salton Sea. The State Water Board's role in hosting the annual workshop came about as a result of recommendations made by the State's Salton Sea Task Force, and through continued oversight of a water right transfer order. Condition 28 of Water Rights Order (WRO) 2017-0134 requires the State Water Board to hold an annual workshop and receive an annual report from the SSMP Team

The California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) leads these efforts, in collaboration with the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), collectively the Salton Sea Management Program Team (SSMP Team). The SSMP Team provides an update to the State Water Board with other interested and involved parties in attendance. In addition to information presented by the SSMP Team, the annual public workshop is an opportunity to hear from additional organizations on their involvement in the SSMP effort, and for the State Water Board to receive comments from the public.

Section 4: Salton Sea Management Program Annual Report

The main focus of the workshop is to receive an update from the SSMP Team on the SSMP, based on their annual report. The SSMP Team submitted their 2025 annual report to the State Water Board by the March 31 deadline set forth in WRO 2017-0134. State Water Board staff recognize that the annual report, while prepared in compliance

with WRO 2017-0134, contains additional content beyond the requirements, including updates on planning, permitting, and construction activities intended to support the delivery of future milestones, as well as information on environmental conditions at the Sea. The report is available in English and Spanish on the SSMP website at: saltonsea.ca.gov as well as State Water Board's Salton Sea webpages in English and Spanish. The SSMP Team will present information from their report during the May 20th workshop.

Section 5: More Information

The State Water Board maintains a webpage in both English and Spanish with additional information on the Salton Sea and engagement on the Salton Sea Management Program. Information relating to the upcoming workshop and how to participate will be added to the webpages as it becomes available.

For questions regarding this staff report or the upcoming workshop, contact Stephanie Holstege, Senior Environmental Scientist, Specialist at stephanie.holstege@waterboards.ca.gov.