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THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE (RIVERSIDE, CA.) September 09, 2000, Saturday

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HEADLINE: Consider the paradox of the **Salton Sea**

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BODY:

California's largest lake is situated in its bleakest southeastern desert. Heading south from I-10 on Highway 86 out of Indio, it appears like a shimmering dark blue apparition, surrounded by stark, naked mountains.

Driving by the community of Desert Shores, look up on the mountain at the white line on the rocks. This is the bathtub ring of ancient Lake Cahuilla. The **Salton Sea** today is only the latest in a series of seas, as the Colorado River would meander into the basin, fill it to its brim south of Mexicali, and then turn away, draining back into the Gulf of California. The present-day sea was created during the flood of 1905 when a levee failed on the Colorado River. Unable to plug the breach, the river drained into the sea for two years before the hole could be stopped. Since then, sea level dropped and then rose to its present level at 227 feet below sea level, sustained by agricultural run-off.

The sea is at once serene and austere, apparently lifeless and yet teeming with life. This is the sea's paradox. Agricultural drainage from the rich croplands of the Imperial and Coachella Valleys is the life's blood of the **Salton Sea** -- without it there would be no sea. At the same time, agricultural run-off is the cause of the massive fish-kills and bird die-offs that the sea experiences each summer. The nutrient-rich waters from fertilized fields sustain a soup of microorganisms that provide the basis for one of the most productive fisheries in the world. These, in turn, support millions of birds. More than 400 species of birds have been recorded around its shores -- two-thirds of all species in the continental United States! Yet, as waters warm during summer months, blooms of algae explode and then die-off, starving the waters of oxygen. Then the fish die.

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Anaerobic bacteria, like botulism, thrive; and pelicans and cormorants die by the thousands.

Much attention has been given to controlling rising salinity in the sea -- which will indeed be a problem in the next 15 years or so if nothing is done about it, but the real threat to the sea today is water supply. Mandated reductions from the Colorado River and proposed water transfers between the Imperial Irrigation District and San Diego pose a far more imminent threat. Restoring the **Salton Sea** must include finding additional water or there will be no sea. Alternative sources of water supply range from periodic flood flows from the river to treated municipal wastewater delivered from San Diego or even San Bernardino. In any scenario, we must identify new sources of water supply in order to sustain the paradoxical treasures of the **Salton Sea**.

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