

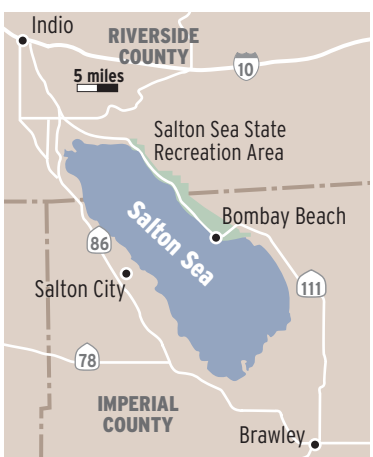
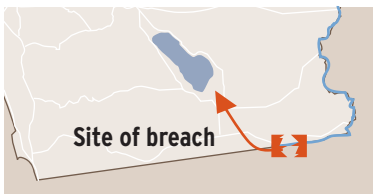
Focus | ENVIRONMENT

SEA OF CHANGE

Dead fish at the Salton Sea in September 2014. The massive die-off of fish and shrinkage of the sea are major factors in creating terrible-smelling health hazards known as "big stinks."

FORMATION

The sea was formed when floodwater from the Colorado River broke through irrigation canals and flowed into the Salton Sink (-265 feet below sea level) for 16 months from 1905 to 1907.



Imperial County population, 2011: 174,529
 Mexicali, Mexico, population, 2011: 996,826
 Farming acres: 830 square miles

Size comparison



The vast majority of water going into the lake is from agricultural runoff full of fertilizer and chemicals from hundreds of fields that flows from the New River and Alamo River on the south shore.



The 2003 Quantification Settlement Agreement has kept current water levels from rapidly destabilizing. But on Dec. 31, 2017, the water allowed to flow into the sea will be siphoned off and used otherwise.



Wildlife
 As the salinity of the sea has increased, three species of fish have died off. The sea is still filled with tilapia that some of the more than 400 species of birds in the area feed on. The sea is a major stop for migrating birds.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SALTON SEA HISTORY MUSEUM



In the 1950s and '60s, the Salton Sea was a major tourist attraction with more visitors each year than Yosemite. Celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, pictured above, frequented the sea's marinas. The 35-mile-long sea with high salinity became a favorite of boat racers, and many speedboat records were set in races.

The Salton Sea is the largest lake in California and could become one of the state's biggest environmental disasters.

By KURT SNIBBE/ STAFF

A bad situation is getting worse at the Salton Sea. The rapid shrinking of the lake exposes acres of dry, chemical-laden land that gets swept up in dust storms and is a health hazard that grows bigger by the day. Nearly 600,000 people are in close proximity to the lake, but wind has carried the stench from the sea as far as 150 miles to Los Angeles.

Just about everyone who lives near the sea – as well as state officials, academics, water districts and air quality managers – wants the situation resolved, but how much and at what cost has yet to be determined.

If a cleanup is launched now, conservative estimates for mitigating the potential health hazards to residents start at about \$4 billion over the next 20 years. The costs could be more than \$40 billion if things continue as they are, according to a

recent study by the Pacific Institute. Tim Bradley, a professor at UC Irvine and director of the Salton Sea Ecological Initiative, said, "The Salton Sea is a huge public health threat for the state as well as an environmental threat."

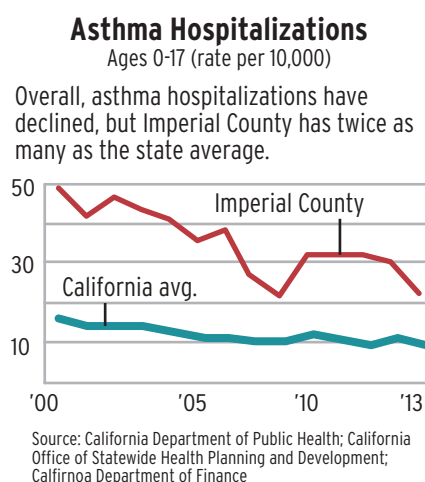
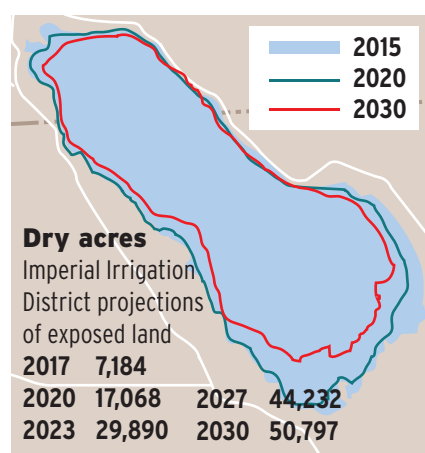
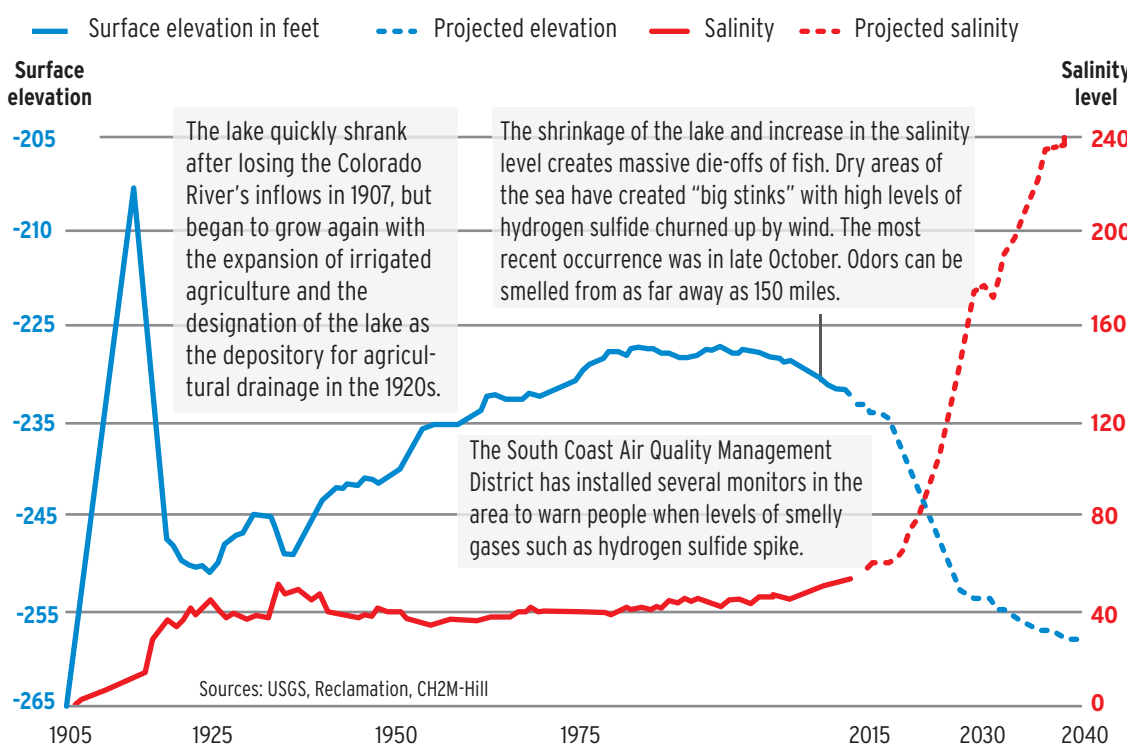
A ticking time bomb
 To make matters worse, the shrinking sea still has water flowing into it from the Colorado River – but not for long.

A water rights agreement from 2003 – the Quantification Settlement Agreement – will divert at least 40 percent of the water flowing into the sea to residents in San Diego, and the sea will decline faster.

Will El Niño help? "I think rain this winter will have little effect, and will certainly be outweighed by water diversions starting in 2017," Bradley said.

RISE AND FALL

The sea has been steadily shrinking for 10 years and is expected to rapidly decline when inflow waters are diverted in 2017.



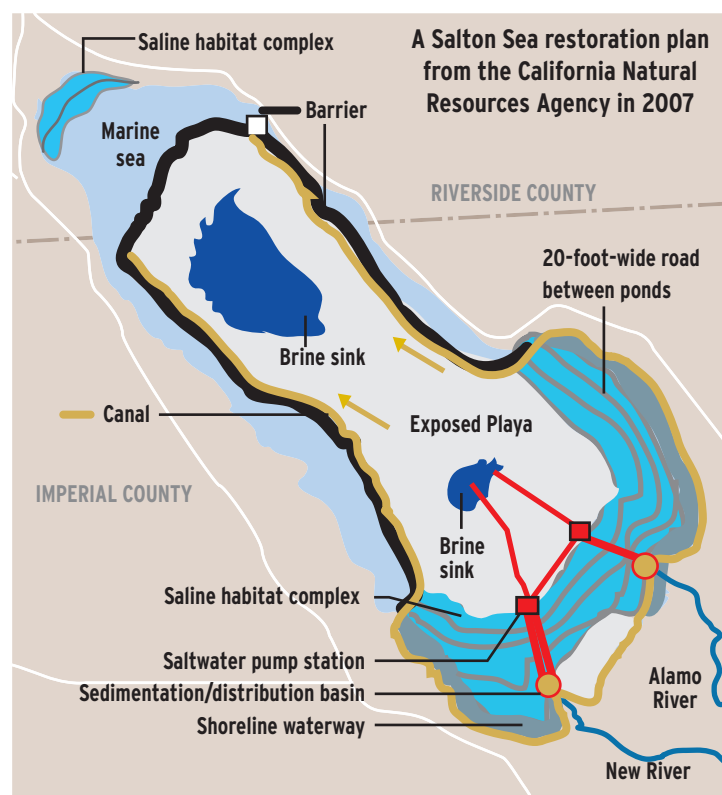
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Small steps toward restoration

The Little Hoover Commission studied many plans offered over the years and recommended one from 2007, detailed on the right.

The proposal recommends using berms around the lake to create several types of pools for fish and wildlife, as well as restored recreational areas along the shoreline.

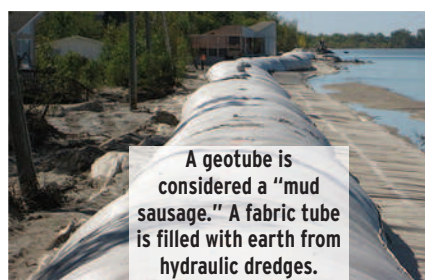
One of the obstacles for establishing berms at the Salton Sea is that the terrain is too muddy for heavy equipment to traverse. Another option under review is the use of geotubes, but no official plans for their use are in place to date.



Why little has been done:

The Little Hoover Commission submitted a report to Gov. Jerry Brown in September. Among its findings: "The Quantification Settlement Agreement, signed after the recall election of Gov. Gray Davis but before Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was inaugurated, put California on the hook for a blank check for the Salton Sea by an administration that would never be held accountable for it. The result was inaction."

Bradley said, "The Salton Sea is in an isolated area with little political power, and the issue was ignored during the state's budget troubles in the last recession."



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