ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA Region 9)

California Air Resources Board

Project Title: Salton Sea Community Support Plan

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Project Background:

In October 2019, Imperial County declared a public health emergency because of the deleterious impact of the Salton Sea on human health and wildlife. The Salton Sea is a shallow lake with an area of approximately 375 square miles that straddles Imperial and Riverside counties in southeastern California. Over 20,000 Californians live in small communities along the shoreline of the Salton Sea. According to the latest census data, a large majority of residents identify as Latino or Hispanic. In addition, using metrics defined by CalEnviroScreen, over 60% of the population is living in poverty.

The nearby Imperial Valley and Coachella Valley regions are arid, which necessitates the irrigation of hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land. An extensive agricultural drain system and channels convey run-off and drainage from irrigated fields to the Salton Sea, which is a terminal lake with no outlet. As a repository for agricultural drainage, the Salton Sea is heavily polluted with agricultural chemicals, including pesticides and fertilizers. Salts in the drainage water have also increased the salinity of the lake water to levels higher than the Pacific Ocean. For over 30 years, researchers have documented extensive contamination of Salton Sea water, sediment, and playa (dried sediment) with the level of some contaminants above toxic thresholds.

The water level of the Salton Sea began to decline significantly in 2015. Decreased inflow to the lake is resulting in an exponential increase for playa along the lake's shoreline. Over 17,000 acres of playa was exposed in 2017, and over 67,000 acres are

projected to be exposed by 2028. The Imperial Irrigation District is the local agency responsible for mitigating dust emissions from playa and estimates that 0-35 tons of dust are blown off Salton Sea playa daily, depending on wind factors. Residents of the Salton Sea-area communities experience elevated prevalence of asthma and other respiratory symptoms and are concerned that dust blowing off the exposed playa is causing or contributing to chronic health problems.

There are several research studies underway to investigate the dust emissions and health problems generated by the Salton Sea.

Project Description:

The California Air Resources Board (CARB) will develop a plan to comprehensively assess and respond to the urgent environmental health crisis at the Salton Sea. The primary goal of this plan is to assess community health concerns and promote collaboration between environmental and public health researchers, NGOs and residents to address these concerns. This will be accomplished through convening community members and local NGOs, university and college investigators, and members of state and local agencies over the next year for the purpose of developing a comprehensive and cohesive plan for addressing community health concerns.

Over the next year, CARB will hold at least two meetings to better understand and formulate an approach to addressing the concerns of Salton Sea-area residents impacted by the declining ecological health of the Salton Sea and increasing playa dust emissions. The meetings will include individual researchers, residents and stakeholder groups, and state agency staff. The meetings will provide opportunities for local residents to openly share their concerns, possibly with the assistance of a professional facilitator, and for researchers to present studies and projects that are planned or ongoing in the Salton Sea area. The focus will be the impact of playa dust on health and including the specific health concerns raised by the community. At these meetings, participants will discuss gaps in research, strategies for better coordination of research efforts, emerging needs, and future research directions. These meetings may be held remotely.

The primary goal of the Salton Sea Community Support Plan is to unite state and local stakeholders and researchers to work together on addressing this environmental health crisis. CARB will produce a work plan from the results of these meetings to promote awareness of the issues of concern, and assist in the coordination of research and agency efforts to improve public health in Salton Sea area communities.

Project Activities:

1. Develop the Salton Sea Community and Research Support Plan
    - Convene committee to include CARB staff, community members, an academic partner and NGOs

- With committee input, develop a support plan, including at least two meetings to share research needs and plans and promote collaboration in the region;
- Coordinate with local AB 617 Steering Committees in developing the plan and outreaching to community members
- With committee input, decide on facilitation plans for either staff or outside contractors to facilitate the meetings.
- Compensate community members involved in task force meetings with stipends to cover time and electronic participation costs.

2. Implement the Salton Sea Community and Researcher Support Plan
   - Select and invite Salton Sea-area community members and NGOs, academic researchers, local and state agency representatives working on Salton Sea environmental health issues to participate in meetings
   - Convene two or more meetings focused on the following topics:
     - Concerns and health issues raised by communities and residents
     - Presentations on ongoing or planned health and exposure research in the Salton Sea area
     - Discussions on research and technical support needs to better support environmental health goals for the Salton Sea area
     - Strategies for better coordinating research to support community needs

3. Develop an action plan and assessment measures
   - Based on input from the meetings, identify technical support needs and areas where collaboration and joint research planning can improve research efforts and better address community health goals

4. Prepare a report on Salton Sea Community and Research Support Plan activities, presentations, discussion and recommendations to include ideas for next steps