

How to save the Salton Sea: Proposal to import seawater across California desert is biggest since Hoover Dam

California's Salton Sea has been drying up for years. Can the proposed infrastructure projects help save it?

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Time is running out to come up with a plan to save the Salton Sea. Water levels in California's largest lake continue to drop, subjecting nearby communities to harmful levels of toxic

dust stirred up from the dry, exposed lakebed.

For more than a century, the shallow lake has been a beneficiary of the Colorado River water that feeds the nearby Imperial Valley farm fields. As water was sold off and diverted, more than 15,000 acres of lakebed containing years of fertilizer and pesticide runoff were exposed to the air and desert winds.

The dwindling water supply increases the lake's salinity, killing off fish, destroying once-lush migratory bird habitats and making children sick from the airborne toxins stirred up in the dust.

Kaylee Pineda, a child living in Westmorland, Calif. speaks about her experiences with asthma

Many of the players on Kaylee's Little League team have asthma. The coach says he watches his asthmatic players and is prepared to respond if any of them start gasping for air.

Zoë Meyers, Palm Springs Desert Sun

The California Natural Resources Agency was tasked with coming up with a long-term fix by the end of 2022, and 11 plans on the table focus mainly on one big idea: pulling in water across the U.S.-Mexican border from the Sea of Cortez north to the Salton Sea. Some proposals are more

ambitious than others, envisioning tourism and shipping industries popping up along the desert canal.

Though full costs are unknown, fixing the Salton Sea arguably would be the biggest North American water project since the construction of the Hoover Dam in the 1930s.

What's happening to the lake?

The modern Salton Sea – which has filled several times before – formed in 1905, when floodwaters from the Colorado River to the east breached an irrigation canal and dumped into a low-lying area called the Salton Sink, a depression in the desert that formed the lower basin of the ancient prehistoric Lake Cahuilla.

In the hundred years since the lake formed, it's been sustained by agricultural runoff and became a rare stopover point for migratory birds traveling the Pacific Flyway.

As the Colorado River water has been transferred from the farms neighboring the lake to growing urban areas, the Salton Sea's footprint has shrunk.

The satellite images below show the impact:

A model released by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 2015 shows what the lake footprint could be in 2035 with no remedial efforts to reverse the lake's fate.

Effects of a shrinking lake

Two major forces affecting the lake's health are its loss in water level and the sharp increase in salinity, which is twice as high as the ocean. Since 2000, the Salton Sea's surface elevation has dropped more than 10 feet, and more than 15,000 net acres of dry lakebed, known as playa, have been exposed.

The salinity levels of the water kill off fish populations, resulting [in fewer fish-eating birds such as pelicans and cormorants](#). Many birds have died of hunger.

As the Salton Sea dries up, the [health toll on humans is alarming](#). Imperial County more than doubles the rest of California in the rate of asthma-related emergency room visits among children ages 5-17.

Any successful plan to save the Salton Sea will need to reverse these trends while providing economic benefits to offset the huge costs.



Kids play baseball during a dust storm in Westmorland, Calif., on March 30, 2017.
Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun

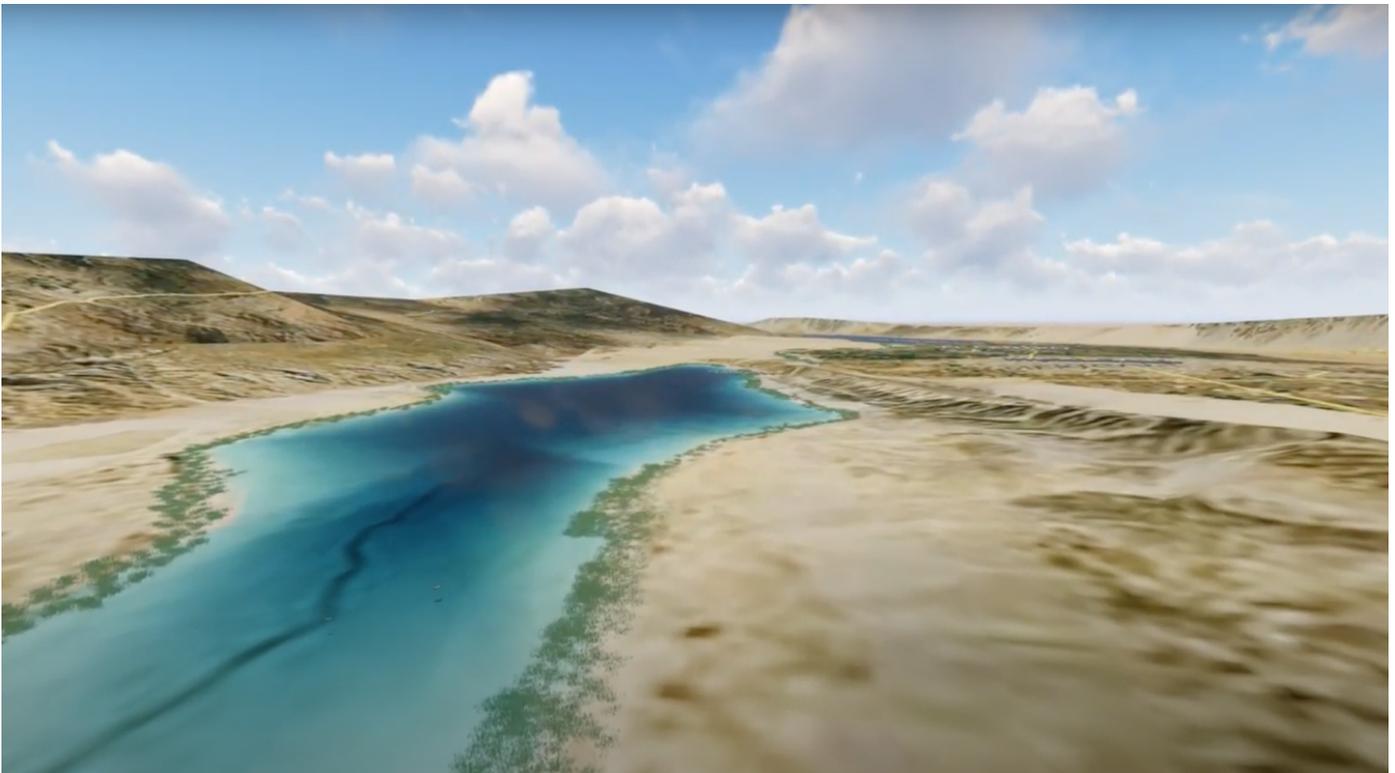
Possible routes for a sea-to-sea fix

The most commonly discussed idea is to build a canal across the U.S.-Mexican border that connects to the Sea of

Cortez, 125 miles to the south, and import water to the Salton Sea. By comparison (although much more narrow and shallow), a sea-to-sea canal would be more than twice as long as the Panama Canal.

Such a sea-to-sea route has been promoted by businessman Gary Jennings, a founding partner of the Sea to Sea Canal Co.

Another proposal submitted by Agess Inc. includes flooding 142,000 acres of a dry lakebed in Mexico called Laguna Salada and creating economic development in Baja California.



Agess envisions how the Laguna Salada would look filled with water channeled from the Sea of Cortez.

Agess

Sending ocean water across the desert wouldn't be an easy fix, and any plan would need to negotiate agreements with a variety of stakeholders on both sides of the international border with Mexico. Even carefully laid routes would need to traverse private land, communal farmlands and Cucapá territory. On top of the permitting and treaty hurdles, an exact dollar amount isn't known, but estimates have suggested costs for a canal project would range into the billions of dollars.



A dust storm blows through Westmorland, Calif., March 30, 2017.

Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun

Coachella Valley-based architect Nikola Lakic knows how to fix the withering Salton Sea. Or, at least he says he does.

Lakic believes it's possible to import water from Mexico's Sea of Cortez — or, perhaps, from the Pacific Ocean off the California coast — through a multi-billion-dollar system of pipes. He would construct mangrove habitat for natural water filtration, send desalinated water to geothermal plants and, amid all this, restore California's largest lake.

"This is the project of the century," he said.

His idea is more than a sketch on the back of a napkin. It's highly engineered, and he's not alone. [Lakic is the author of one of 11 formal proposals for a "sea-to-sea" solution that the state of California is currently evaluating.](#)

Dig Deeper

Stories from the Salton Sea

The problem is well-known: Much of the deluge of Colorado River water that once flowed from Imperial Valley farm fields into the Salton Sea [was sold off years ago](#), as climate change further stressed the overdrawn river. As the lake has shrunk, it's uncovered a dusty lakebed imbued with a century's worth of pesticides, fertilizer and salt picked up in that irrigation runoff.

Tens of millions of dollars have been spent on studies, permitting, planning and small projects to tamp down dust, but [more than 15,000 acres of lakebed sit exposed](#) to the

desert wind, while nearby communities suffer elevated levels of respiratory illnesses.

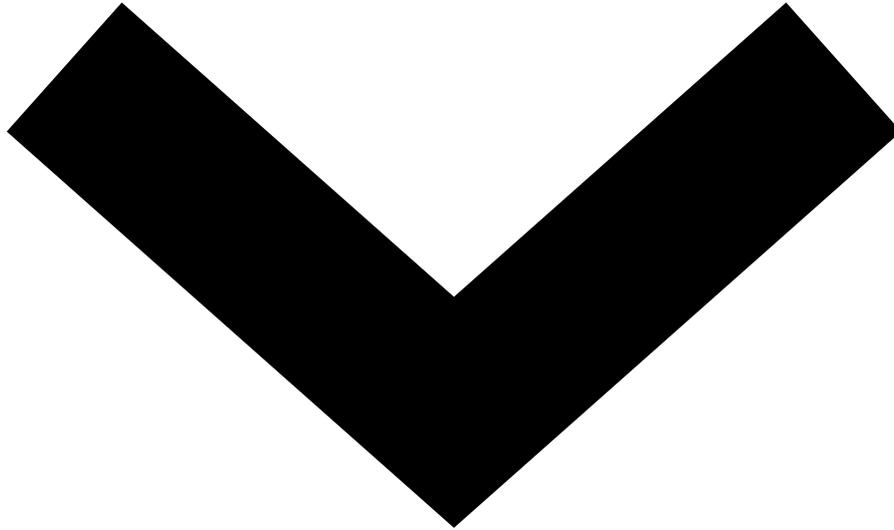
The clock is ticking on a solution. The California Natural Resources Agency — the lead government entity charged with restoring or mitigating the Salton Sea — owes the state a long-term plan to fix the problem by the end of 2022.

A chorus of private-sector engineers and Salton Sea advocates claims the silver bullet is building a canal across the U.S.-Mexico border to pull water from the Sea of Cortez, 125 miles to the south.

In late 2017, the Natural Resources Agency [put out a request for such proposals](#) and a few months later had those 11 in hand. Then, according to the teams that submitted the ideas, the state went largely quiet on the issue, once again leaving the proposition of refilling the Salton Sea in limbo.

■

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Canal del Coyote, in the Mexican state of Baja California, extends from the Sea of Cortez north toward the Sierra Cucapá and Sierra Juarez mountains....

Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

“It’s just a fucking lake, man. It’s not that hard to fix,” said Gary Jennings, one of the driving forces behind the resurrection of the decades-old seawater importation idea. He's a founding partner of the Sea to Sea Canal Company, where he spent several years working on the project while

based in Mexico.

The proposals sitting before the state range from Jennings' relatively simple water transfer project — he calls it “the Kmart of canals” — to an intricate design that would flood a second lake nearly the size of the Salton Sea and effectively geoengineer the Southwest's climate.

Jennings is adamant his canal would cost less than \$1 billion, while most of the proposed projects would easily cost several billion, in addition to tens of millions of dollars annually for operations and maintenance.

“Anything's possible with the right political will — and the right financial backing,” said Nathan White, CEO and co-founder of AGESS Inc., his vehicle for submitting a proposal that includes flooding 142,000 acres of a dry lakebed in Mexico called Laguna Salada and catalyzing new economic development in Baja California.



Nathan White is the CEO of Agess Inc., one of the companies proposing to import water through Mexico from the Sea of Cortez to the Salton Sea.

Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

To ground-truth whether such bold ideas are possible, The Desert Sun reviewed hundreds of pages of project designs, traveled to Mexico to inspect the most likely route of a canal and interviewed dozens of stakeholders, including engineers, politicians, landowners, environmentalists and

researchers.

What emerged was a picture of a mega-project that's technically feasible but up against numerous roadblocks. Any seawater importation plan would need to break through decades of inertia at California state agencies, secure financing likely to the tune of billions of dollars, amend an international water treaty, extract and dispose of tens of millions of tons of salt from the lake, navigate a tangle of jurisdictions and land ownership, cooperate with an Indigenous group in Mexico and do all this quickly enough that there's still a Salton Sea worth saving.

"These import schemes are a distraction," said Michael Cohen, a senior researcher at the Oakland-based Pacific Institute think tank. His years of studying the Salton Sea led him to believe that such a plan [would require the importation of about 2.8 million acre-feet of water per year](#) (about 910 billion gallons) to balance salinity while raising the lake's level, and would easily cost billions of dollars — and take years to permit.

"The time until these projects are functional is decades," Cohen said, "and I would argue we don't have decades with the Salton Sea."

The engineers, architects and project managers who dreamed up the sea-to-sea plans disagree, arguing that

their proposals would create a positive economic ripple effect, that they've already lined up agreements with landowners along the canal's route and that they're just waiting on the state to shoot the starter's gun.

They've also secured support from numerous local governments around Southern California. All nine Coachella Valley cities, the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians and several Imperial Valley cities have passed resolutions, written letters or otherwise called on the state to give seawater importation fair consideration.

"The proposed public-private project could have a positive impact on the local economy and quality of life on both sides of the border," Nicholas Wells, Holtville's city manager, wrote in a letter to the Natural Resources Agency that was included in one of the 11 proposals. Holtville, home to roughly 7,000 people, sits east of El Centro.

But to many of the politicians and agencies charged with addressing the Salton Sea, seawater importation is a pipe dream.



Canal del Coyote winds north through the Laguna Salada as the Sierra Cucapá is seen on the east and the Sierra Juarez on the west.

Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

Tina Shields is the water department manager at the Imperial Irrigation District, the single largest user of Colorado River

water and an integral player in any Salton Sea fix. She labeled the lake "a challenging piece of nature, and there's not an easy solution." To Shields and others, engaging with such a scheme is counter-productive and distracts from tangible fixes.

The Natural Resources Agency has once again launched a study into the feasibility of seawater importation, and stakeholders believe the findings could signal the make-or-break moment for the sea-to-sea idea. Meanwhile, California is forging ahead with other plans, such as building wetlands habitat and dust suppression projects and constructing a test site that might become a [4,030-acre horseshoe-shaped lake at the north end of the Salton Sea](#). Politicians hope these smaller ideas will, together, provide the answer.

"Waiting around for these gazillion-dollar projects that involve two governments and money the state clearly doesn't have, we're going to get nothing," Shields lamented.



The northern end of the Sierra Cucapá is seen during sunrise from the Laguna Salada.
Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

As impactful as the Hoover Dam

The Earth stretched out barren and cracking for miles under the bright Mexican sun, disrupted only by a seemingly out-of-place trickle of water, no more than a few feet across. A

half-deflated, red mylar balloon floated in the salty concoction near some crumbling concrete and rebar, the detritus of unknown construction. This hardscrabble place, called Laguna Salada, represents the Pacific Ocean's final push inland with tides bringing seawater north twice a day from the Sea of Cortez, through a channel known as the Coyote Canal, and here into the desert where it's finally dispersed.

Laguna Salada — "Salty Lake" in English — is sandwiched in a valley between two mountain ranges, Sierra Cucapá and Sierra Juarez. Within Laguna Salada's borders, nothing but the occasional tire stuck into the ground marks the few unpaved roads. Otherwise, the sandy dirt stretches into the horizon until it runs into the distant peaks bestowed with ominous names such as the Devil's Fang.



Chuck Parker is an advocate for importing ocean water into the Salton Sea to help the sea's long-term viability.

Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

It's a harsh place, where rumors of drug cartel activities abound and where emergency towers are placed every few miles so lost travelers can call for help before dehydration claims them. But this spot on the western edge of the Sonoran Desert also marks the beginning of the most likely route of seawater importation from the Sea of Cortez to the Salton Sea — arguably the biggest North American water

project proposed since the Hoover Dam was built in the 1930s. Although much more narrow and shallow, the sea-to-sea canal would be more than twice as long as the Panama Canal.

Any successful seawater importation project would need to check several boxes, including:

- raising the Salton Sea's water level by bringing in clean water
- reducing the Salton Sea's salinity levels, currently twice as high as the ocean, potentially by pumping out brine
- providing economic benefits that would justify such a massive undertaking

"It's far from impossible," mused Jennings, the sea-to-sea proponent. "It's just a money thing."

That money would likely buy a channel that takes advantage of the existing Coyote Canal, extending it north through Laguna Salada. The canal would snake its way across the desert, turning east near El Centinela — a mountain close to the border — before dipping underneath the border fence. It would hug the western edge of the Imperial Valley, avoiding farm fields and remaining on Bureau of Land Management land where permitting would be easier. It would then finish its journey by shifting back across Highway 86 where it needs to cross the smallest amount of private property before

dumping into the Salton Sea's southwestern corner.

The designers envision massive benefits on top of saving the Salton Sea. Wildlife could return to wetlands along the lake's shores. New tourism or shipping industries could spring up along the route. The construction could go hand-in-hand with solar power, geothermal energy and lithium extraction, all vital to a clean energy future.

"This is a pilot project for starting global climate change mitigation and management," said White, a project designer.



Solar panels power a date farm's well on the west side of Laguna Salada in Baja California.
Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

But myriad questions hang over the proposals. To handle salt, would a second canal take brine back to the Sea of Cortez, or would it be treated near the Salton Sea? And, if brine is dumped in the Sea of Cortez, can it be done without harming the [critically endangered Vaquita porpoises that are endemic to those waters](#)? To account for the Laguna Salada's major landowner being the Cucapá Indigenous group, would construction skirt their land or cut a deal with them? And, instead of a canal through Laguna Salada, is it possible to flood the historical lake and create new economic opportunities — perhaps drumming up Mexican support?

Other proposals would take different paths, but those bring

even more challenges and aren't as well-developed as the Laguna Salada route.

One envisions a route through the Mexicali Valley, but that likely needs to be avoided because it's heavily populated and has too much agriculture that would be put at risk with saltwater passing through. Another proposition — drawing water directly from the ocean off the U.S. coast — is likely cost prohibitive due to the electricity that would be needed to get water over the mountains in eastern San Diego County.

These moonshot ideas, though, are far from new. The Bureau of Reclamation — the federal agency managing water in the West — produced a report in 1998 studying 54 plans to control the Salton Sea's rising salinity and keep its surface elevation constant. Among those were variations of the sea-to-sea idea, although the agency left those off a 2007 list of options.

The administration of California Gov. Jerry Brown, who left office in 2019, “really halted the process, and a new governor and new team had to come in and restart and reassess this project, and then it got set back by COVID,” said state Sen. Ben Hueso, D-San Diego, who has pushed the idea on both sides of the border but says he's been left “frustrated” by the process.

State Sen. Ben Hueso talks with Karol Ruelas, a senior from Brawley High School, at a Salton Sea Leadership Tour in 2017.

Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun

To Jennings, the plans, the know-how, the agreements with landowners and the potential binational partnerships are all taking shape and waiting for California to make a funding commitment. He estimates the groups behind the 11 proposals collectively spent decades and millions of dollars planning their routes and engineering their designs. Despite years of maneuvering, Jennings has little to show for it save for a [Facebook group where he keeps about 550 interested people up-to-date.](#)

"We have tried. A lot of guys have tried, and we have gotten nowhere," Jennings said, exasperation permeating his words. "If (state officials) tell you they want to save the lake, they're lying."

To determine if the answer is seawater importation, the state is yet again turning to a feasibility study. Sea-to-sea stakeholders see this as the make-or-break moment when the state could finally decide to either accept the concept or put it to bed forever.

California's Natural Resources Agency is shying away from doing this itself and spent months looking for a third-party analyst. Two initial requests for applications failed to locate a qualified analyst. [Then in April, the state announced it found](#)

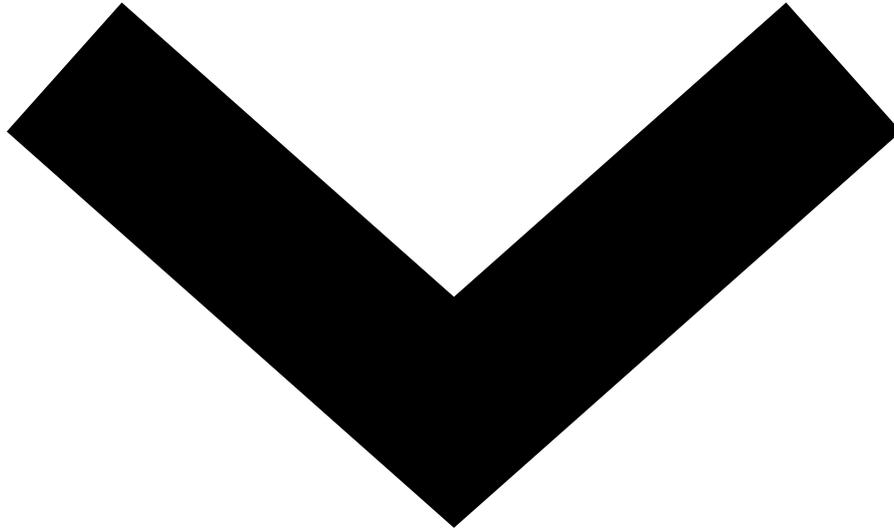
[someone](#). Researchers at the University of California, Santa Cruz, will in June begin evaluating the 11 projects. They'll be given about a year to decide whether any — or more likely a combination — are feasible. Then, the state will have a few months to weigh that suggestion against other options before the 2022 deadline.

Still, sea-to-sea proponents are skeptical of the evaluation process. They noted that the main researcher on the UC Santa Cruz team, Brent Haddad, [penned an opinion piece in the Los Angeles Times in 2002 that argued](#), "Attempting to restore the Salton Sea would mean spending too much money on a wish."

Haddad told The Desert Sun that, when he wrote the piece, "the major proposals for restoration I was aware of did not include water importation, so I didn't consider it as a possibility." California Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot said the state was aware of the piece but was unconcerned. He said much had changed since it was written, the university's role would just be to convene an independent panel and Haddad assured the state he would be objective.



Show caption



As the Salton Sea shrinks, dusty lakebed known as playa is exposed to the wind. This stretch at the southwestern corner of the lake could...

Omar Ornelas/ USA Today Network

Arturo Delgado is California's soft-spoken Salton Sea czar, managing the state's day-to-day response from a plain office looking out on a strip mall parking lot in the Coachella Valley. He's confident the state is back on track after years of floundering, and he points to an increase in funding, the

hiring of more staff and support from Gov. Gavin Newsom. When the state announced the partnership to study sea-to-sea, Delgado said, "UC Santa Cruz has significant experience facilitating independent technical panels, and we are excited with the multidisciplinary approach they will take on this project."

He said that three of the initial 11 projects rose to the top based on a scoring system. Those came from the engineering firm Cordoba Corporation, whose project could cost more than \$3 billion; the Binational Water Group that has since joined Jennings' team; and Michael Clinton, a longtime player in the Southwestern water world and a former IID general manager who negotiated a water sale to San Diego.

"I knew at that point in time that a solution was necessary, and I started looking for a solution in the early 1990s," Clinton said.



California Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot is adamant the state is taking the sea-to-sea proposals seriously. "I would like to advance the most ambitious long-term vision that we can," he said.

PAUL KITAGAKI JR./THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Delgado's boss, Crowfoot, is adamant the state is taking this seriously. "I would like to advance the most ambitious long-term vision that we can," he said.

Meanwhile, even though UC Santa Cruz is restarting its study with the 11 projects, the state continued soliciting input. Southern California residents have been more than happy to pitch theirs.

Eric Hanscom went big, for example, inventing a “tidal creator” that he floated to the state and The Desert Sun. It would pump water into the Salton Sea and send it over the playa with artificial tides. Rob Zimmer, meanwhile, proposed a more constrained idea, envisioning a boat with a hose and a nozzle. It would float around the edges of the lake, sucking up water and spraying it and chemical binding agents over the playa. Dan Silvers, an octogenarian retired aerospace engineer and Palm Desert snowbird, said, “All these mickey mouse projects that (the state is) spending millions on will get nothing done.” So, he pitched a mega-port in the desert.

“Visualize the Suez Canal coming right up to the Salton Sea,” Silvers said.



Farms dot the land in Ejido Federico Martinez Manatou, an area of communal agriculture in Mexico's Laguna Salada region.

Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

Just not that simple

Large ships sailing up Laguna Salada into the Salton Sea — that’s exactly the rumor Eliseo Vieyra first heard a few

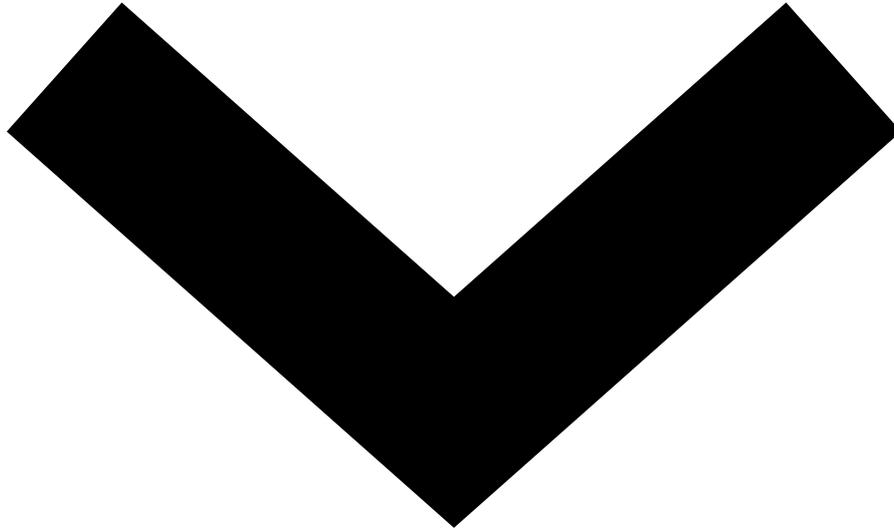
years ago. Vieyra is a date farmer near Laguna Salada in a community called Ejido Federico Martinez Manatou. ([An ejido is a piece of communal land in Mexico](#) that's used in part for agriculture.)

Wearing a "Hogwarts alumni" sweatshirt, he gave a tour of the date farm his family runs, the palms forming a cool, shaded oasis. He said the soil is good for growing, and the multitude of ripe lemons hanging from a tree — where a turkey waddled nearby and a dog chased goats out of their pen to pasture — backed up his claim. A solar array powered a pump, piping water from a well to a small reservoir. "If you dig, you'll find water," he said.

Vieyra is vaguely in favor of the sea-to-sea idea, but there's little knowledge of how a nearby canal — or a flooded Laguna Salada — would affect individual farms because project proponents haven't spoken to these *ejidatarios*.



Show caption



Eliseo Vieyra uses a mirror to shine light inside a well on his family's date farm in Ejido Federico Martinez Manatou. He says the farm...

Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

"If it gets done, I would like to take advantage of it to be able to stimulate the economy here, incentivize the fishing industry and get some other development for the *ejidos*," Vieyra said.

A few plots away from the Vieyra date farm, Francisco Baez

Salazar was busy working on a well. He's lived in the area since he was a child and said he first heard talk of transporting water across the desert several decades ago. "Now, it's making more noise," he said.

He's concerned though, with the idea to inundate Laguna Salada with seawater. The area's agriculture relies on wells that tap into a large aquifer spreading underneath the valley. In some spots, you don't need to dig too far to reach water, and all that salt could spell devastation for growers whose produce is shipped around the country and abroad.

"We don't have a problem with it if it's just a canal, but if you flood the whole thing, there are going to be problems because of the salt," Baez Salazar said.

If California picks a canal-only idea, there's still the problem of land ownership. Securing a pathway through Laguna Salada means traversing land belonging to *ejidos*, private owners, the federal government or the Cucapá.

"Even the dead people" are going to show up to see if they can get paid, Baez Salazar said.



Francisco Baez Salazar, at left, works on a water pump in Laguna Salada.

Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

At least three of the sea-to-sea groups tried to strike deals with the Cucapá to transport water across their land. About

70% of the Laguna Salada basin is owned by the tribe, according to Alan Dennis, a civil engineer based in Mexicali who has researched the idea. Antonio Badillo, a representative of the Cucapá leadership, said that amounts to roughly 350,000 acres around Laguna Salada.

"We have been working on it for at least five years," Badillo said during a March meeting held by AGESS, the group proposing the large sea-to-sea plan that would flood Laguna Salada. "This project is of real importance for the community because it will help not just the Cucapá community, but also both Mexicali, Baja California, the state of California and the Salton Sea."

But despite his optimism, the tribe and project proponents continue falling into and out of the partnerships that would be necessary to get shovels in the dirt. Jennings swore off working with the Cucapá after a deal fell through, and he now thinks he can build the canal to the west to avoid them. Roberto Cossio, the CEO of a group called Quadrant II, said he holds "full, exclusive and irrevocable rights to develop their area," but since working with Cossio, the Cucapá began speaking with White's group, AGESS.

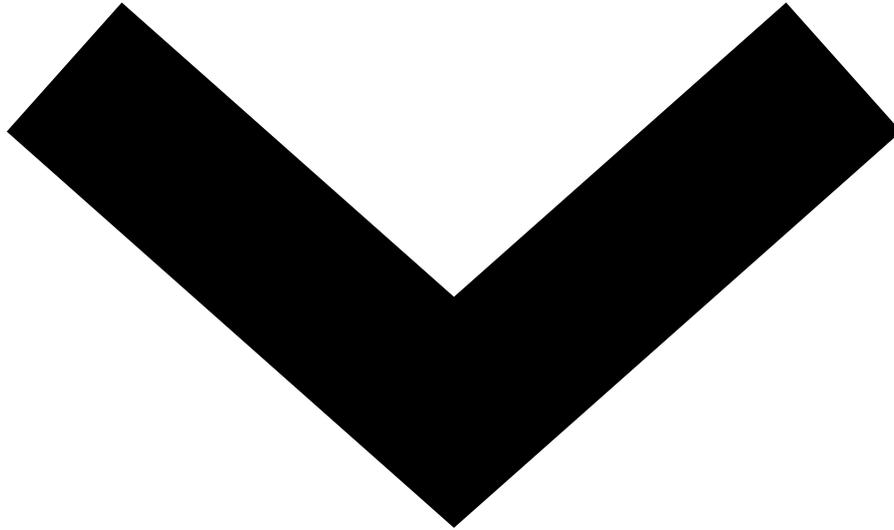
Then there's the cost. [The 11 proposals include revenue-generating components](#) such as selling desalinated water, trainloads of salt, geothermal energy or even solar power generated from an array floating on the Salton Sea. Many

envision an eventual net surplus. Jennings' plan alone includes nine funding proposals, and he said the state merely needs to step in as a buyer of the canal water. He and Cossio both said they had been in talks with Berkshire Hathaway for funding, as well.

But even if their projections are correct, for all of the ideas, someone needs to front the massive construction costs.



Show caption



Rep. Raul Ruiz stands near the North Shore Yacht Club during a tour of the Salton Sea in March 2020. "It's not that I'm opposed,"...

Mark Olalde

And therein lies another problem. U.S. Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Palm Desert, [has pushed aggressively for action on the Salton Sea](#), making him the best bet to secure federal support and financing. But the sea-to-sea idea lacks his crucial support. While he's interested in the possibilities of

what he calls "one grandiose and Cadillac plan," he refuses to engage deeply with sea-to-sea until smaller projects are rapidly progressing.

"It's not that I'm opposed," Ruiz said. "It's that I have some more urgent, pressing needs right now to address."

At a certain point, waiting any longer on sea-to-sea renders it meaningless due to the declining state of the lake and the investment made in other mitigation efforts. Some researchers say that point has already passed.

Lucia Levers, formerly of the University of California, Riverside, is an environmental scientist and economist at the University of Minnesota's Water Resources Center. [She studied the idea of seawater importation](#) and came away unimpressed by the potential cost and timeline.

"The idea of a transnational agreement of this magnitude being somehow put in place immediately so you could even begin construction — which would take forever — as a way to save the sea when the sea is dying right now, it's just ridiculous," Levers said. "That solution is not a solution for the sea."



Engineers and advocates for a sea-to-sea solution tour the Coyote Canal in 2014.
Courtesy of Gary Jennings and Ecomedia Compass

An issue of binational proportions

Arturo Guerrero Cortés animatedly picked up a stick to supplement his words with a picture he scratched in the crusty dirt. He's an eccentric encyclopedia of Laguna Salada knowledge tucked behind bookish glasses and under a dirty, fraying Palm Springs Power baseball cap. A resident of a Laguna Salada *ejido*, he closely monitors the region and has assisted Jennings' sea-to-sea team.

"This is the Cucapá land," he said, scraping in the dirt. A rough map emerged — the Coyote Canal running north across land belonging to the Indigenous group, then across the eastern corner of Ejido Guardianes de la Patria where he lives. After that, a potential canal buildout could go across variations of land belonging to different owners. At this point, it's purely theoretical.

"First, the different *ejidos* need to agree on this project," he said, peering around an old Cucapá fishing ground on the Coyote Canal he was visiting. He dipped his fingers in the water to taste test the canal's salinity. Small trees lined the banks. The site included a few decaying wooden structures, a stripped Yamaha personal watercraft and an assortment of eclectic decorations, including a fish and a pair of water skis nailed to a wooden pole.

Simply put, without buy-in directly from the Mexican president, sea-to-sea is "very difficult," he estimated.

Any project coming from the Sea of Cortez would require a binational agreement of some sort, but details are elusive. Both the Bureau of Reclamation as well as project proponents believe that would be negotiated through the International Boundary and Water Commission, which was established in 1889 to facilitate international water treaties.

Sally Spener, the U.S. Secretary to the IBWC, said the agency only received a formal presentation on seawater importation from one of the 11 groups that submitted plans to California — that was from Clinton. With so little dialogue, she said that it was even “premature to say what international agreements would need to occur.”

“There is no agreement of the International Boundary and Water Commission,” Spener said about the sea-to-sea idea. “There’s no plan.”

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The Coyote Canal winds through Laguna Salada.

Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

Michelle Van Der Linden, spokesperson for the BLM’s California Desert District, said the agency manages about 260,000 acres under and around the Salton Sea. The BLM is also part of the U.S. Department of the Interior, which signed a 2016 memorandum of understanding with California to collaborate on the Salton Sea Management Program.

"Any State proposal to traverse BLM-managed lands will require (National Environmental Policy Act) analysis including public input prior to authorization," Van Der Linden wrote in an email. "Any cross-border project planning would require prior authorization from Department of State and the Department of the Interior."

To determine whether government entities north of the border had laid any foundation upon which Jennings, White, Cossio or anyone else could build their canal projects, The Desert Sun reached out to various government agencies and politicians, posing this question: Have you spoken with anyone in the Mexican government about sea-to-sea plans?

- **California Natural Resources Agency:** "No," Crowfoot said.
- **California State Water Resources Control Board:** There's been no conversation.
- **U.S. Bureau of Land Management:** There has been no dialogue with Mexican authorities.
- **U.S. Bureau of Reclamation:** "It's not timely at this time until we really know what the state would like to move forward with," said Genevieve Johnson, the agency's liaison on Salton Sea issues.
- **Imperial Irrigation District:** The water district has been involved in no official dialogue, according to Shields, its water department manager.

- **U.S. Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Palm Desert:** There's been no cross-border conversation.
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- **State Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella:** He's spoken with Mexican legislators and regulators, but political turnover south of the border and no set plan north of the border meant talks only went so far.
- **State Sen. Ben Hueso, D-San Diego:** He's been in talks with Mexican politicians for several years, but, he said, "at some point, we have to have a plan and go to them with a more concrete plan."

Project proponents agree that until the state takes the lead, their own negotiations in Mexico can only do so much.

Crowfoot, the Natural Resources Agency secretary, explained how far off those discussions are from starting. "If we're going to engage in a dialogue with the Mexican government, either at the federal or state level, I would expect us to actually come with a reasonable understanding of what the project is, how it would work," he said.

Further complicating matters, all the years of discussions mean politicians at both the state and federal levels in Baja California and Mexico City have come and gone. State elections are once again upcoming this year, meaning there

will be a new governor of Baja California. Like a game of political Chutes and Ladders, Hueso, Garcia and project proponents make inroads and start talks, only to have time and leadership change set them back while they wait on California.

“We’ve been doing our job, but we’re just one spoke in a very large wheel,” Hueso said.

Laguna Salada

Omar Ornelas/ El Paso Times

In recounting the years of twists and turns the sea-to-sea idea experienced, Guerrero Cortés labeled several logistical hurdles as “the biggest problem” — securing Cucapá signoff, working through bureaucracy in a nation with a history of corruption, determining land ownership across the 100-plus-mile route and assuaging concerns about transporting saline water near agricultural land.

Back on his *ejido*, Guerrero Cortés spread map after map on a picnic table next to a 55-gallon metal drum being used as a makeshift stove to heat tortillas. He pointed out the various landowners who would need to, at the same time, all come to an agreement to make sea-to-sea happen.

He rustled through another stack of documents until he found the piece of paper he wanted, dropping it on top of the

pile of maps — [a Desert Sun story featuring Jennings leading a delegation](#) to Laguna Salada to pitch his sea-to-sea dream.

That article, full of optimism, was published in March 2016. The Coyote Canal remains as it was then, still trailing off into nothingness at the bottom of a dry, salty lakebed in Mexico.

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