

Committee on Resources

Testimony

Subcommittee on Water and Power

Friday, October 3, 1997

Palm Desert, CA, 10:00 A.M.

**TESTIMONY OF TOM VEYSEY
A FARMER IN IMPERIAL COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1997

**COLLEGE OF THE DESERT
PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA**

Honorable Congress Members:

My name is Tom Veysey and I am a resident of Brawley in Imperial County (also known as Imperial Valley), California, where I have farming interests and also engage in public service as a member of the Salton Sea Authority and serve the voters in District 4 on the County Board of Supervisors. District 4 encompasses all of Imperial County's portion of the Salton Sea.

I wish to visit with you as an agricultural producer. Agriculture is far and away the cornerstone of the Imperial Valley economy and its destiny is as dependent on the Salton Sea for drainage as it is on the Colorado River for water. But producers are anxious for the Salton Sea's restoration for reasons beyond the role of an irrigation drain water repository. We take pride in our participation as community-builders who are vitally interested in the quality of life available to our families and communities. We look on the Salton Sea as a tremendous asset with vast economic opportunity for all of the desert southwest and the so-called Inland Empire. Indeed the sea is sick, but given its restoration and renewed vitality, it will be a magnet for enterprise facilitating recreational activities and environmental gratification.

In its restored state the sea will be embraced by the Inland Empire and Southern California as a major recreational and environmental resource.

In its revitalized state, the Salton Sea will partner with agriculture to support the region's economy in ways that will not undermine its infrastructure of services. I envision a healthy sea as adding greatly to our tourism and visitor market and vastly enlarging the region's business opportunity base. This will provide new initiatives that should contribute to expanded, qualitative employment opportunities, contributing to better prosperity for rural and city life.

When it is restored the sea will be essentially reliant on agriculture for drain water inflow to help maintain its elevation. The development of the sea into a healthy, thriving recreational mecca will bring greater understanding of its relationship to our region's agricultural system.

The business of food production is fiercely competitive and increasingly fraught with high cost, risk and calamity. Farmers have to farm smarter and manage more effectively with each new crop year in this changing world. It will be challenging for agriculture to sustain a role into the new millennium as the principal job-producer and wealth-maker of the County. Our cropping patterns are now in the throes of major change from the traditional ones as we seek newer crops and methods to sustain agriculture's economic engine. However, the necessity to force the salts through the soils and the resulting drainage will continue. Some of this change is due to pests and disease from such indomitable foes as the Silverleaf Whitefly that throttled our melon deal and afflicted numerous other crops. Some is due to market price decline in what used to be a bellwether of economic vitality -- vegetables. Some is due to bad luck such as occurred in our tremendously promising durum wheat industry that was dealt a crushing blow with the unjustifiable imposition of a quarantine following the discovery of Karnal bunt in Arizona. Multi-faceted industries such as cotton that once was a hub-bub of activity with its production, harvesting, ginning, warehousing and shipping long has been in decline from natural pests. Cattle production, another major leg of the County's stool of economic vitality, has waned significantly in need of meat and slaughtering facilities.

Producers are struggling to find crops they can depend on that will yield a return. It might appear that we are not being true to our badge as conservationist and environmentalists when we plant crops that are more water-intensive than others and have to use chemicals to control pests and disease. But we sometimes have to do what we have to for survival. I remember when we used to take a pause in our farming in August and recommence in September. Now we don't stop. We really can't afford to. We have to make tremendous investments in plastic-lined rows, sprinklers and drip irrigation systems to attain higher yields to offset the eternal crunch of spiraling input and handling costs. Then when our crops reach a delicate, critical state and are smitten with, say, a whitefly invasion we need to have a chemical to go with integrated pest management practices to protect the crop. We are trusting that the EPA's administration of the Food Quality Protection Act doesn't take away all of the means to survive major pest assaults and disease unless there are affordable alternatives and many of these appear a long way from reality.

Little wonder that producers are interested in water transfer. When such transfer occurs it will provide some very necessary funds to producers that can be used to modernize and equip themselves to deal with a turbulent business environment so they can stay in business.

Even when we are able to retool and fully refuel agriculture's economic engine in Imperial Valley, we will continue to need state and federal research support to help us find better production practices, embracing both conservation and environmental needs, as well as methods to deal with pests and disease. The Whitefly Management Committee of Imperial County is spearheading a unique, applaudable association of county, state, university, and federal resources which might be able to get that dreaded pest under control. Continued research on such problems will be necessary. Additional creative planning both within our county and in surrounding counties, together with the state and federal resources might help us attract a cattle processing facility to the region. Alternative agriculture enterprises providing value-added products from agricultural refuse could fortify our agricultural economic base. And many more opportunities are before us with some additional research and strategic planning.

As a producer and a general citizen, I applaud the united interest of our legislators in seeking serious, meaningful funding for the restoration of the Salton Sea as well as the New River. All of my life I have been associated with the Salton Sea. It's like an old friend whom you never want to see in a state of decline. As a youngster I enjoyed many recreational activities there. I got to know it extremely well one night after taking it for granted during an outing of fishing and water skiing, becoming incapacitate and having to

spend the night in the center of the sea and the subject of search parties. Two others that night weren't as fortunate as I, for they lost their lives. Needless to say I have a lot of respect for the sea. But it has pained me to witness the decline of the sea and nothing would please me more than to be a part of its restoration. That is why I am at this moment working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and supporting Congressman Duncan Hunter's citizen's task force on the New River headed by Leon Lesica, involving our residents and communities in a New River cleanup project that will contribute importantly to the restoration of the Salton Sea. It's a simplified yet exciting concept of building holding ponds which would allow the water to rest and purify and then be released into the sea as it is needed to maintain the critical elevation posture.

And further, I am supporting the concept of a diked impoundment as the preferred approach to restoring the Salton Sea. Salinity is clearly the most paramount problem associated with the restoration. Diking appears to me to offer the best buy for the dollar in dealing with the heavy salt load of the sea and its critical water level. The diked impoundment concept coupled with the management of cleaner inflows from the New River, Alamo River, Whitewater and other sources seem to me to be wise, doable choices. The concept also offers future opportunities to include other solutions which require longer timelines for implementation and effectiveness.

I am glad that the Salton Sea Authority scores agriculture highest in its evaluation of criteria associated with the restoration project. In as much as Imperial County has the highest unemployment rate in California and the lowest median income, the one billion dollar industry of agriculture must be preserved and enhanced. We accept this challenge to change our future by working with you to improve this major resource and allow Southern California to further diversify by benefitting from the resources we enjoy. I have endeavored to outline for you some of my beliefs as a farmer why agriculture vitally needs the Salton Sea and why the sea cannot do with agriculture.

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