

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 29, 2022

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Michael Connor
Assistant Secretary for Civil Works
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20314

Dear Secretaries Haaland and Vilsack and Assistant Secretary Connor:

We are writing to request that you jointly develop a near-term funding plan to fulfill the U.S. Government's acknowledged initial landowner responsibility of at least \$332.5 million over the next decade to manage the exposed Salton Sea lakebed. We ask that you prepare this near-term funding plan by December 31, 2022 in close coordination with the California Natural Resources Agency and the Salton Sea Authority, which is composed of locally elected leaders, the Torres Martinez Tribe, and major area agricultural districts.

In recent years, water inflows to the Salton Sea, California's largest lake, have sharply declined as the result of changing agricultural practices and water conservation efforts undertaken to stabilize the water supply security of the Colorado River Basin. As the Salton Sea shrinks, toxic elements such as arsenic and selenium are exposed on 8.75 square miles of Federally owned lands. When strong desert winds broadly spread this toxic dust, it disproportionately harms the disadvantaged communities surrounding the lake. In particular, Imperial County is 85 percent Mexican-American and has among the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in the nation. Approximately 1 in 5 Imperial Valley residents have been diagnosed with asthma, *more than double the national average*, and pediatric emergency room visits for asthma and respiratory distress in the region (to include Riverside County and Tribal communities) are three times the California average. It is critical for the health and well-being of these communities that we work to mitigate the adverse effects of the receding Salton Sea as quickly as possible.

Congress has urged immediate Federal action to address the government's landowner responsibility to protect the public health of these disadvantaged communities. The Joint Explanatory Report for the just-enacted Fiscal Year 2022 omnibus

appropriations bill directs Reclamation “to provide to the Committees not later than 90 days after enactment of this Act a briefing on Reclamation’s plan for managing the air quality impacts of the estimated 8.75 square miles of lands it owns that will emerge from the receding Sea over the next decade.” In its Fiscal Year 2021 budget request, Interior estimated a \$332.5 million near-term cost to manage these lands (\$38 million per square mile for the 8.75 square miles in federal ownership), plus \$4.5 million annual operations and maintenance cost. Interior’s budget request cautioned that these cost estimates are “extremely conservative.”

Congress has provided your agencies with multiple well-funded programmatic authorities from which a near-term federal Salton Sea funding plan may be derived, including through the *Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act* and various Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation authorities. While we appreciate and strongly support the Corps’ inclusion of \$1.5 million in its IJA workplan to advance a Salton Sea feasibility study to contribute federal funding support for long-term Salton Sea management, we are keenly interested in what near-term funding the Corps could direct to address the United States’ immediate landownership responsibilities.

We note that the Salton Sea funding plan we request will significantly advance the Biden-Harris Administration Executive Order 14008, which provides that 40% of federal infrastructure, energy and related investments should flow to disadvantaged communities like those surrounding the Salton Sea. The United States also bears Tribal trust responsibilities to the Torres Martinez Tribe.

While we believe Congress has provided you with ample direction, authority and funding to address the United States acknowledged near-term Salton Sea obligations, to reduce the public health burdens of the disadvantaged communities surrounding the lake, and to further protect federal interests in the region over the long term, please notify us if additional congressional direction is needed to support this work. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Raul Ruiz
Member of Congress



Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



Grace Napolitano
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress