

Salton Sea renewable energy tour draws lawmakers to lake

Written by K Kaufmann The Desert Sun

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State Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg boards a bus to tour different renewable energy projects at and near the Salton Sea in Imperial Valley, CA on Tuesday, October 1, 2013. (Richard Lui The Desert Sun)



State Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, third from the left, Assemblyman V. Manuel Pérez, front, and others view power plants out of a bus window during a tour of different renewable energy projects near the Salton Sea on Tuesday.

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Assemblyman V. Manuel Pérez, front, and others view power plants out of a bus window during a tour of different renewable energy projects near the Salton Sea on Tuesday. / Richard Lui/The Desert Sun

California should bring all its resources to bear to support renewable energy development and restoration efforts at the Salton Sea, said a top state lawmaker while touring the area Tuesday.

“I don’t think most Californians know in Imperial County we have the greatest variety of renewable energy sources,” said Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, as he visited the Featherstone geothermal plant in Calpatria. “When you consider its relationship to the Salton Sea, as a state we need to do everything we can to put to work all the economic development tools we have to help catalyze the opportunity.”

The Featherstone plant was one of three stops on Steinberg’s whirlwind tour of the area — possibly the first time a state Senate president pro tem had come to Imperial County, said state Sen. Ben Hueso, D-San Diego, who led the tour.

With more than a dozen Imperial County and Imperial Irrigation District officials on the bus, the tour included stops at a 23-megawatt solar plant in Niland, already pumping out electricity for IID, and an algae plant, also in Calpatria, developing both biofuels and nutritional supplements.

“He’s a very important negotiator in budget debates; he prioritizes bills. He’s a central figure in the Senate,” Hueso said of the potential impact of Steinberg’s visit. “Very few people in Sacramento understand the problems with the Salton Sea. Today is important for getting Sacramento to understand.”

Renewable development is a major focus for job creation in Imperial County, which has the highest unemployment rate in the state — 26.3 percent in August. The county currently has three solar plants online and another six in construction, covering about 7,500 acres of previously disturbed agricultural

land, said Andy Horne, the county's deputy executive officer for natural resources development.

Coachella Mayor Eduardo Garcia, who also works as a district representative for Hueso, said while the tour's focus was Imperial County, legislation supporting renewable development at the Salton Sea could have a positive impact on Riverside County and the Coachella Valley, which have a wealth of wind and solar resources.