

Brown appoints Bruce Wilcox to lead Salton Sea policy

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(Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

Salton Sea stakeholders, look out: There's a new sheriff in town.

Well, sort of.

Gov. Jerry Brown said this week he has named Bruce Wilcox assistant secretary for Salton Sea policy, a newly created position within California's Natural Resources Agency. Wilcox currently oversees Salton Sea-related projects as the Imperial Irrigation District's environmental manager.

Wilcox will coordinate the many local, state and federal agencies working to limit the public health and ecological disasters brewing in California's largest lake. He'll make regular trips to Sacramento but continue to work locally, which he said will help address concerns that state officials don't understand how bad the problem is.

"It needs to be somebody that has some background with the local stakeholders, and is here to see the day-to-day impacts of the Salton Sea," he said.

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CalEnergy's Hoch geothermal plant in Calipatria, near the shore of the Salton Sea, churns out electricity on July 28, 2015. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

The Salton Sea was once a prime destination for fishing, boating and tourism. But as the agricultural runoff that feeds the lake has declined in recent years, the water has receded, kicking up dust that blows into the Coachella and Imperial valleys. The lake has also become increasingly salty, leading to tilapia die-offs and threatening endangered desert pupfish.

The lake will shrink even more rapidly starting in 2018, due to a massive water transfer deal that will send more farm runoff to San Diego County and the Coachella Valley. If nothing is done to slow its decline, the lake could become a public health and environmental catastrophe costing as much as \$70 billion ([/story/news/environment/2014/09/03/deteriorating-salton-sea-cost-tens-billions/15004557/](http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2014/09/03/deteriorating-salton-sea-cost-tens-billions/15004557/)), according to the Oakland-based Pacific Institute.

Wilcox has been a key player in efforts to minimize the damage caused by the shrinking lake. He helped develop a \$3.15 billion Salton Sea mitigation plan that the Imperial Irrigation District and Imperial County rolled out in July, replacing a \$9 billion plan that died in the state Legislature because it was so expensive.

In the short term, that plan would pay for pilot projects designed to cover parts of the exposed lakebed with small pools, which would suppress dust and provide habitats for fish and birds. In the long term, the plan would boost geothermal energy development, which local officials believe could help fund larger-scale mitigation projects.



Birds gather along the shores of Bombay Beach, a small community on the north shore of the Salton Sea, on July 28, 2015. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

In his new position, Wilcox hopes to shepherd that plan —and a similar initiative being developed by the local Salton Sea Authority — from vision to reality.

“There’s a lot of reason for optimism. In the last year to two years, there’s been great progress,” he said. “A lot of good planning has gone into this. This is sort of the last step that helps put the mechanism in place.”



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Wilcox’s appointment also has symbolic value: It’s a sign that California has heeded the Imperial Irrigation District’s calls to take responsibility for the ailing Salton Sea.

When the district approved the massive farm-to-city water transfer deal in 2003, it did so on the condition that California would pay for the bulk of the Salton Sea’s restoration. Since then, the Imperial Irrigation District has urged state officials to live up to their commitment, implicitly threatening to cut off promised water flows to Southern California cities if the state doesn’t come through.

With Wilcox’s appointment, that possibility no longer seems likely.

“The state recognizes they have a responsibility at the Salton Sea, and they are trying to fulfill that,” Wilcox said.



Mecca Beach Campground is seen along the Salton Sea on July 28, 2015. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

The Imperial Irrigation District is far from the only agency hoping to solve the problems emanating from the Salton Sea: Imperial and Riverside counties, the Salton Sea Authority, the state's Little Hoover Commission, the California Department of Water Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians are also involved. Earlier this year, Gov. Jerry Brown launched a task force to help expedite construction of wildlife and air-quality projects.

Wilcox, who leaves the Imperial Irrigation District for his new job later this month, will need to coordinate all of those groups. Similar appointments have helped the state address other complex, stubborn problems, said Keali'i Bright, deputy secretary for legislation at the Natural Resources Agency.

"For us, it's been a proven strategy for tackling tough issues," Bright said. "Having somebody housed at the agency, with a charge to manage these programs, pinpoints the leadership for the success of this program."

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