

Developing Lithium Valley: Hydrosocial Dynamics & the Importance of Community Engagement for a Just Transition

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Overview

The Salton Sea region (Eastern Coachella Valley & Imperial Valley) is home to several disadvantaged communities. Located in the south eastern deserts of California, this region is being framed as a sacrifice zone that can save the climate crisis.



World Atlas



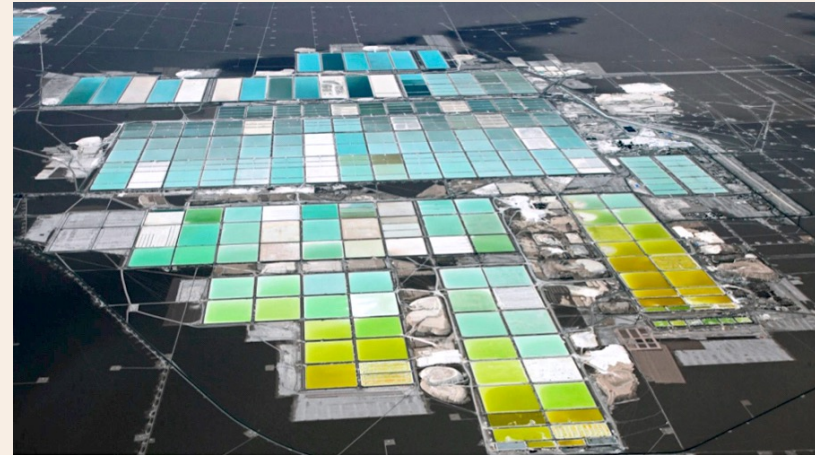
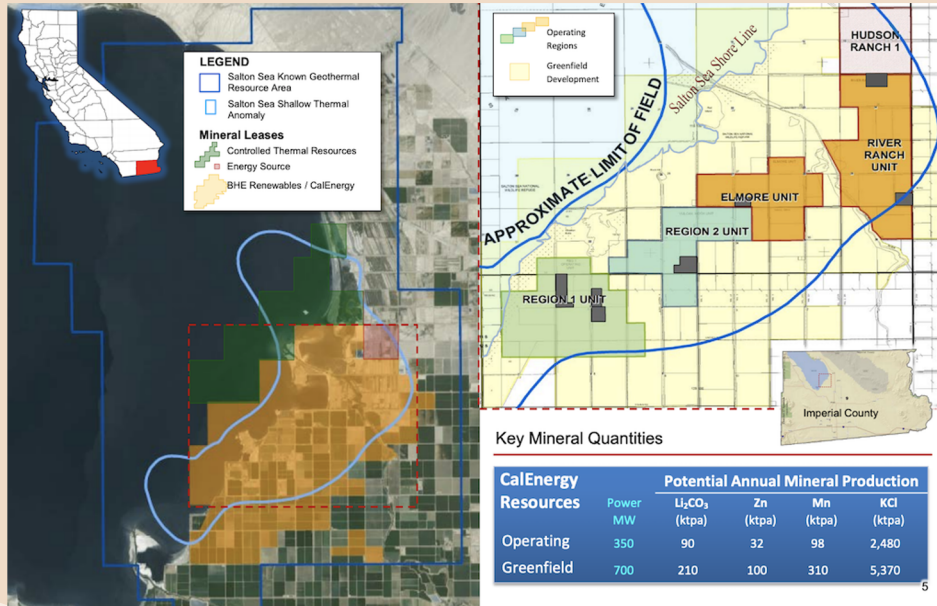
Origins of the SALTON SEA

Large Lake → Dry Basin → Salton Sea



- Previously a part of the larger, Lake Cahuilla, which resulted from the flooding of the Colorado River
- Expanded & contracted varying on the flows of the Colorado River.
- The basin of the Salton Sea dried up completely in the 16th century.
- It remained dry until the early 1900s, when there was a malfunction with a gate, that caused water from the Colorado River to flood the basin.

Lithium Mining in CA vs in South America



Mining Frontier

Water Concerns in Imperial Valley

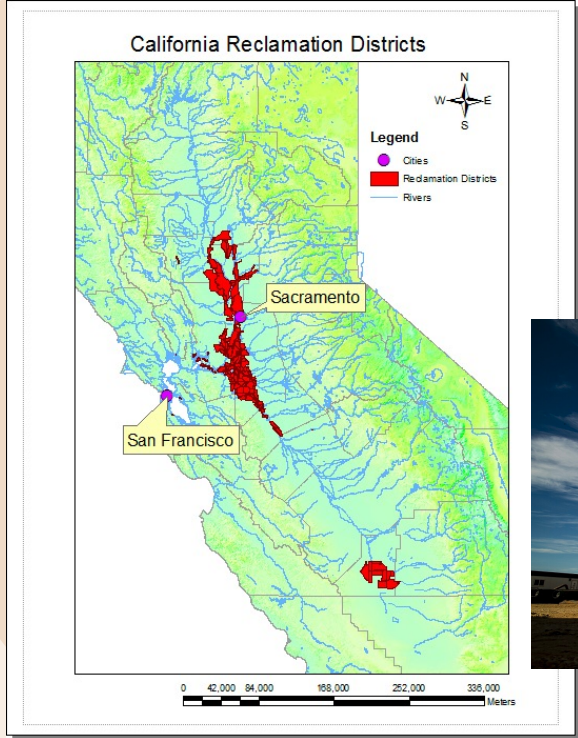


[Water Education Foundation](#)

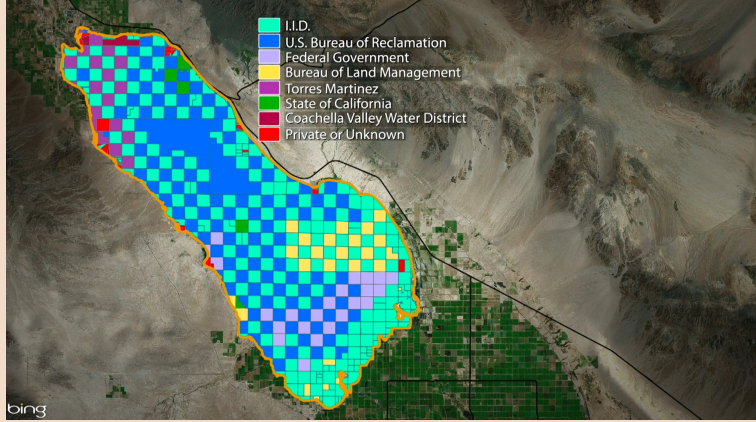


[Raoul Rañoa, University of Redlands](#)

Hydrosocial Dynamics: Reclamation, Restoration, and Recovery



LA Times



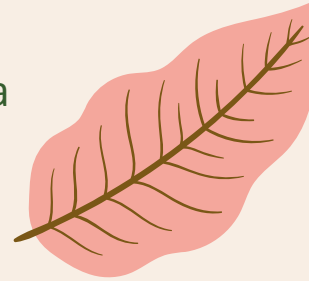
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Community Engagement



- Hydrosocial imaginaries in Imperial Valley have historically been envisioned without the full engagement of the community, and some community members fear repeating this with the Lithium Valley project.
- Limited attempts have been made to ensure that knowledge is accessible to the community members
- With previous failed attempts to revive the Imperial Valley, it is important to consider the local knowledge of community members in order to make a transition to renewable energy that is just and equitable.





Research Design

Mixed Methods



Semi-structured interviews



Participant observation



Document Analysis



Interview Results

"We cannot let it be worse than it is, because we already have a receding sea, because of the water transfer. That's making it worse as we speak every day..." - Imperial Valley Community Organizer

"If the geothermal is going to use water, why are we not prioritizing the Salton Sea?" - Coachella Valley Community Organizer

Participant Observation Results

- The Lithium Valley Commission has only held one community forum since it was created in the beginning of 2021.
- Lithium Valley Commission meetings are approximately 3.5 hours long and are hosted on weekdays, making it difficult for the average community member to attend.
- Government and industry language is used prolifically, without a significant amount of effort to make the content easier to understand.

Conclusions

- Community-based, in-person meetings, in which government, civil society and private interest groups participate may allow for more robust discussion of development plans with local community members. The meeting format and schedule needs to be culturally and linguistically inclusive, so that a diverse group of community members can attend and engage.
- Community benefit agreements, severance taxes, and/or the creation of a sovereign wealth fund may help redistribute resource wealth for greater public good. However, such agreements may also result in silencing of dissent, state abandonment and an absence of regulation, monitoring and transparency (Peterson and Le Billon 2015). It is critical for federal, state and county managers to remain engaged with the community while adhering to principles of environmental justice.
- More coordination on wetland restoration and geothermal lithium development is necessary. A critical approach to the water-energy nexus may help illuminate the hydrosocial dynamics between geothermal lithium development and the Salton Sea's ecological and health crises.

Next steps:

- Funding proposal under review with NSF (others in preparation or submission)
- Continue to analyze public comments and permitting processes
- Follow-up interviews with key actors and participant observation at public meetings
- Community-based action research, citizen science and participatory planning

Thank you!

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