

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

May 20, 2021

Regional Director Paul Souza  
Pacific Southwest Region  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
2800 Cottage Way  
Sacramento, CA 95825

Chris Schoneman  
Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
906 West Sinclair Road  
Calipatria, CA 92233

Dear Regional Director Souza and Mr. Schoneman,

We're writing to you regarding the Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) role as a partner in the construction of the Red Hill Bay Project at the Salton Sea. The Red Hill Bay Project (RHB Project) broke ground in 2015 but has yet to be completed. Recent public reporting has indicated that the project is stalled and that both the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) and the FWS have outstanding obligations for this project.

For decades, inflows to the Salton Sea have been reduced, resulting in thousands of acres of exposed lakebed and rapidly declining water quality that threatens the local ecosystem and public health of surrounding communities. The RHB Project is a joint effort between IID and the FWS located on land owned by IID at the southern end of the lake. This project was designed to create over 600 acres of shallow saline ponds by mixing water from the Salton Sea and the Alamo River.<sup>1</sup> These ponds would facilitate new habitat for birds, while also preventing dust from emerging into the air.

The initial RHB Project Cooperative Agreement was signed in 2010, and construction formally began in 2016. The project was designed to be "the first decisive step in the efforts to restore the Salton Sea" and serve as a model for how landowners, project developers, and government agencies could work together to protect the public's health.<sup>2</sup> In June 2020, the Imperial County Air Pollution Control District (ICAPCD) issued air quality Notices of Violation to both IID and the FWS stemming from the incomplete project.

In order to identify the ongoing challenges and establish a path to forward to complete the Red Hill Bay Project, please return written answers to the following questions to our offices by June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

- 1) Please outline the division of responsibilities for the RHB Project for both the FWS and IID.
  - a. Please indicate which of FWS's responsibilities have been completed and which remain outstanding. For incomplete items, please explain why the item remains incomplete.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ecos.fws.gov/ServCat/DownloadFile/161293>


<sup>2</sup> <https://calexicochronicle.com/2021/01/30/letter-to-the-editor-dust-up-at-the-salton-sea/>

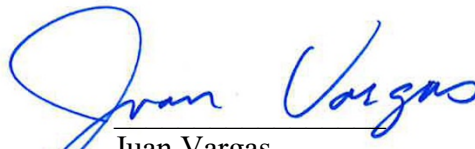
- 2) Does the RHB Project have active federal and/or state permits?
  - a. If previously awarded permits have expired, please describe any actions the FWS has taken to secure new permits for the RHB Project.
- 3) What funding does the FWS have available for the RHB Project? Please describe the source(s) of funding and whether any dedicated funding has limitations or required timelines for obligation.
- 4) Is the FWS aware of any physical changes to the RHB Project since January 1, 2021?
  - a. If so, please describe any actions taken.
- 5) What is the status of the FWS's lease agreement with IID with respect to the RHB Project site?
- 6) What actions have the FWS taken with respect to the ICAPCD's Notices of Violation issued on June 22, 2020?
- 7) Please describe what steps FWS needs to take to complete the Red Hill Bay Project and FWS's plan to do so.

The Salton Sea is the most pressing environmental and public health challenge facing our constituents. The Red Hill Bay Project will not only contribute to the improved health of the Sea and the surrounding communities but will also demonstrate to the public that cooperation between federal, state, and local agencies and organizations can lead to successful environmental protection projects.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to receiving your answers by June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Sincerely,

  
Raul Ruiz, M.D.  
Member of Congress

  
Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress