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The Desert Sun

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SALTON SEA



Researchers from UC Riverside and San Diego, along with the local advocacy group Los Amigos de la Comunidad, unveil the UC Dust study during a community meeting in Niland on Aug. 14.

PHOTOS BY TAYA GRAY/THE DESERT SUN

Residents hoping for real action on pollution studies

Janet Wilson Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

Dan Daher rolled out at 5 a.m. from the shaded parking lot behind the Torres Martinez Tribal Community Hall in Mecca, as he does every Sunday through Thursday. By day’s end, he’ll have logged nearly 300 miles in his Kia Niro hybrid, crisscrossing Southern California highways, dust-caked towns and badly potholed roads encircling the Salton Sea and the rural Imperial and east Coachella valleys. He’s driven through a cloud of tractor smoke on Highway 86 so thick he couldn’t see the road, and swarms of butterflies that coated his windshield in Westmoreland. ●

“Everyone thinks I’m Google,” he laughs. Not exactly.

He and other drivers in specially equipped cars are measuring air pollution block by block, microscopic fleck by fleck, around the clock near the contaminated and fast-drying Salton Sea, California’s largest water body. The aim is to give regulators and community members the information they need to push for cleaner air.

Those goals give area residents pause. While innovative, the mobile efforts are one more example of years’ worth of reports, studies, and recommendations about the vast, shallow, and rapidly evaporating Salton Sea. There’s a thirst for tangible action as opposed to yet more numbers.

“It’s just study after study after study, and for what?” said Nellie Perez, 68, a lifelong resident of Niland, a few miles east of the southern end of the shimmering inland water body. “We have been going to meeting after meeting for years ... It’s just a lot of wasted money, in that they don’t come up with a solution.”

With the diversion of huge amounts of Colorado River water from area farms to San Diego suburbs, the terminal lake, which relied on farm runoff to stay afloat, has already shrunk nearly 70 miles, or 40,000 acres, and is twice as salty as the ocean, killing millions of fish and other wildlife. Concerns are now surging about so-called toxic dust in the exposed lakebed, or playa, and its impacts on largely low-income and working-class communities near its widening edge.

Longtime community advocates and researchers say they understand residents’ frustration, but a compelling, precise portrait of what’s in the air and how it affects human health is long overdue.

“It’s far too long that we haven’t been asking the right questions ... How are people affected?” said William Porter, a UC Riverside assistant professor who studies air pollution. Porter said it was “really

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Eric Reyes of Los Amigos de la Comunidad, left, UC Riverside scientist William Porter, and UC San Diego scientist Alexandra Heaney attend a community meeting in Niland on Aug. 14.



Bombay Beach resident Sonia Herbert listens during a community meeting hosted by University of California researchers who are teaming up with Salton Sea area residents to monitor toxic dust in Niland on Aug. 14.

More community events canceled over immigration enforcement fears

Tom Coulter and Jennifer Cortez
Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

Two additional local events celebrating Latino heritage have been canceled due to concerns over stepped-up federal immigration enforcement, following the cancellation of the Coachella Valley’s Virgen de Guadalupe pilgrimage for the same reason earlier this week.

The city of Coachella decided to cancel its traditional Fiestas Patrias event celebrating Mexican pride and independence “due to our community’s fears surrounding ICE activity in the area,” according to city spokesperson Risseth Lora. The free annual event has typically been held at Las Flores Park and included live music, food trucks, electronic bull-riding and games for children.

As an alternative, Telemundo will be broadcasting a live ceremony of “El Grito” — named for the battle cry uttered by Miguel Hidalgo on Sept. 16, 1810 that sparked Mexico’s war for independence from Spain — from Fantasy Springs Resort Casino at 6 p.m. Sunday, according to Lora. Residents 18 and over are also welcome to attend the ceremony in person at the casino.

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