Testimony of Enrique Martinez
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Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
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Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Enrique Martinez and I am the General Manager of the Imperial Irrigation District. Thank you for this opportunity to share our comments on the drought conditions that continue to affect the Colorado River Basin as well as the challenges facing the Salton Sea, California's largest lake.

Collaboration is key for sustainability of the Colorado River

The Colorado River is a shrinking resource and yet the lifeline that serves over 40 million people in the Western United States. Unfortunately, warmer temperatures and drier soils are exacerbating the impacts of the now decades-long drought, and the River's declining hydrology is hard pressed to meet historical allocations and the many competing demands of its multitude of users. With similar challenges affecting most other watersheds within California and the western United States, reservoirs are reaching historically low levels, including Lake Powell and Lake Mead.

Established in 1911, the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) delivers Colorado River water to approximately half-million acres of highly productive farmland, other commercial users and seven municipalities in the Imperial Valley which is located near the United States and Mexico border in Southern California. The continued delivery of Colorado River water, our community's only water supply, is vital to the Imperial Valley to sustain its agrarian economy and rural existence.

Since 2003, IID's water management programs have generated nearly 6.8 million acre-feet of verifiable conserved water from both on-farm and system efficiency programs to meet its water transfer obligations and storage objectives. IID and its water user's exemplary commitment to conservation, with program yields now averaging nearly a half million acre-feet annually, will ensure the long-term viability of the nation's largest agriculture-to-urban water transfer, providing water supply resiliency for California and the Lower Basin.

As the largest single contractor of Colorado River water, it is in IID's interest to serve as a responsible steward of this precious natural resource. IID is actively monitoring the ongoing drought conditions and forecasted reservoir elevations, and supports a collaborative approach to river management including renewed efforts of the Basin States to protect the long-term reliability of the Colorado River system. IID will continue to work with its growers and southern California water conservation partners to promote the efficient management of all Colorado River supplies, and looks forward to additional consultations with federal and Basin State representatives to identify further opportunities that can serve to protect critical system elevations.

In the spirit of agency collaboration, I wanted to share that last month, on September 16, IID and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (Metropolitan) settled a two-year legal dispute regarding water storage and environmental concerns that will result in a number of benefits to the Colorado River system, and in particular to declining Lake Mead reservoir elevations. The reached agreement, in this spirit of collaboration, provides increased storage capacity for IID through Metropolitan's Lake Mead Intentionally Created Surplus account. This will contribute to elevation building efforts in the Lower Basin while expanding the benefits of IID's successful On-Farm Efficiency Conservation Program, which has generated nearly a million acre-feet of conserved water since its 2014 rollout. Metropolitan in turn has committed to supporting efforts to ensure the State of California upholds its Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA) Salton Sea restoration commitments and the utilization of federal partnerships to supplement and expand California's Salton Sea Management Program, and commits our agencies to exploring additional mechanisms to utilize extraordinary conservation to support the Colorado River system.

The only way to ensure the long-term viability of the Colorado River system is for water agencies, the states, tribes, Mexico and other stakeholders that rely on the river to commit anew to working alongside one another to identify new partnerships and solutions to address the imbalance on the Colorado River. As such, IID supports continued coordination and collaboration with federal agencies and Colorado River Basin partners in the upcoming consultation process and as the next set of long-term operational guidelines are developed for implementation beginning in 2026.

The Salton Sea and the Colorado River

The Salton Sea finds itself in rapid decline, causing impacts to the environment, wildlife and the people who call this part of the state their home, not to mention the air quality effects to the neighboring regions in Southern California, Arizona and Mexico. With an estimated surface area of approximately 350 square miles, the Salton Sea is the largest lake in California. The Salton Sea is one of the most important links on the Pacific Flyway, supporting over 400 species of birds and a myriad of invertebrates, including several federally or state listed endangered species, such as the Ridgway's rail, the desert pupfish

and the California black rail. The importance of the Salton Sea as an aviary and wildlife preserve was officially recognized by the federal government with the establishment in 1930 of the wildlife refuge now known as the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge.

In the 1980s and 1990s inflows to the Salton Sea were approximately 1.2 to 1.3 million acre-feet per year, with the majority of the inflows from agricultural return flows. As farmers became more efficient with the use of irrigation water, and as drought conditions have become the new normal, Salton Sea inflows have decreased significantly along with reduced runoff from Mexico. Other factors such as evaporation, changing agricultural markets, local weather conditions and urban conservation and reuse all contribute to current projections that indicate the Salton Sea will see an exposure of up to 70,000 acres of previously inundated lakebed, or playa, over the next 10 years. This newly exposed playa will be a source of particulate matter when it becomes airborne during windy conditions if aggressive dust control measures are not implemented, and further deteriorate the already compromised air quality in the Imperial, Coachella and Mexicali valleys.

Flow reductions to the Salton Sea have already resulted in increased salinity levels that are now twice that of the Pacific Ocean, and caused a drop in surface water elevation that has exposed more than 25,000 acres of barren salt-covered playa. Much of this land is owned by the Department of the Interior (Interior), whose total land holdings at the Sea exceed 110,000 acres. This impending environmental crisis has nearly destroyed the fishery and wetland beneficial uses of the Salton Sea, however the consequential effects on the nearby human populations will be even more devastating. The region is comprised largely of disadvantaged rural communities that are already failing federal air quality standards, saddling them with the state's highest rates of childhood asthma, and can ill-afford yet another environmental and social injustice.

The linkage between the Colorado River and the Salton Sea is irrefutable and the challenges facing it are ones both the upper and lower basins must recognize as a community of aligned interests. The Salton Sea is, as you also know, the linchpin and proving grounds of the nation's largest agricultural-to-urban conserved water transfer program, the QSA. The viability of these water transfers depends, as it always has, on a sustainable path forward at the Salton Sea and the urgency that all of us assign to it. The best way to protect the QSA and ensure there will be water resiliency in Southern California and throughout the Colorado River basin in the future, is to afford that same kind of resiliency, commitment, and dignity to the Salton Sea.

All of the Basin States are acutely aware of the impending water shortages on the Colorado River. Recent modeling suggests that the shortages may be even more severe than previously anticipated. As the Committee is aware, transfers or other mechanisms that reallocate water away from the Salton Sea to address these shortages will hasten its demise. For this reason, protection of the Salton Sea while working with others to increase efficiency of water use will be necessary for any basin-wide Colorado River solutions.

Renewable energy at the Salton Sea

While the challenges at the Salton Sea are vast, there are also opportunities. The Salton Sea Known Geothermal Resource Area is the largest potential supply of this renewable baseload in the world. As the Salton Sea's shoreline recedes, it exposes playa that can provide access to this resource and numerous critical minerals, including battery-grade lithium, an essential component for electric vehicles and energy storage. Geothermal development and lithium recovery from its brine represents a significant opportunity for our community and the nation. It can provide clean energy while helping to spur economic development in one of the state's most impoverished areas, and simultaneously help secure a reliable source of a mineral essential to the development of electric vehicle batteries and other energy storage technologies that are important to achieving state and federal climate goals.

The federal government listed lithium in its critical minerals list and the California Energy Commission has conducted activities to help develop lithium extraction technologies. In addition, geothermal energy can help to address grid reliability concerns given it provides critical ancillary services required to maintain a reliable energy grid. The over 1,700 megawatts of identified geothermal resources located in the Imperial Valley already provide significant value in meeting current and future energy, climate and economic development goals.

Federal investments and support

Federal investments in improving and building new water supply infrastructure can help prevent or reduce the impacts of future droughts. Without a reliable water supply, every sector of our economy would suffer – from agriculture, to manufacturing, to high-tech. Critical water infrastructure must be maintained and modernized to ensure the delivery and safety of water today and for future generations.

Congress has been supportive of additional funding and legislation that helps finance improvements and rehabilitation of aging federal water infrastructure, broadening WaterSMART grants, authorizing a new collaborative program for snowpack monitoring and runoff forecasting and improving the efficiency of authorities for the use of federally owned facilities for aquifer recharge. These are only a few samples of the much-needed investments in water infrastructure and management but they are critical.

Similarly, Congress has repeatedly affirmed its strong federal interest in the Salton Sea, requiring Interior to develop management plans in 1992, 1998, and 2007. Interior is also the largest single landowner, owning roughly 40 percent, of total lands under or adjacent to the Salton Sea. In 2016, Interior and the California Natural Resources Agency signed a memorandum of understanding that focused on coordination, funding, overall prioritization of Salton Sea projects and recognition of the need for federal involvement as the landowner of the largest amount of acreage at the Salton Sea. Now more than ever, progress towards these unfulfilled commitments to protect the Salton Sea is an essential first step towards longer-term collaboration.

IID continues to advocate for protection of the Salton Sea and, with our partners, will continue to support state and federal funding to construct much-needed restoration projects there. IID thanks the Committee for including $250 million for Salton Sea projects in the budget reconciliation bill passed by the House Natural Resources Committee in September.

Collaboration over conflict: The Law of the River

While the recent history of the Colorado River is built on a foundation of collaboration, its early foundation was established by a series of laws, compacts and agreements rooted in conflict and court cases that at times took decades to resolve. Representative Costa posed a question at the October 15th hearing suggesting a future of significantly reduced hydrology and queried participants as to how to offset the supply-demand imbalance moving forward. IID agrees that River planning exercises should follow the science, and acknowledge it is unlikely that the system's hydrology will return to historically forecasted values. But IID also knows that that the River's collaborative success have always respected the Law of the River and the water rights priority system, and must continue to do so or the legal battles likely to ensue would be even more dire than Congressman Costa's hydrologic forecast.

IID is confident that the Basin States, Mexico and tribal water contractors will develop a path forward with the Bureau of Reclamation and other stakeholders, and forge additional partnerships and alliances that build upon past collaborations. The often-competing interests of agricultural, urban, environmental, tribal and recreational water users still overlap on certain commonalities, the first and foremost of which requires maintaining the long-term viability of the system. These efforts are too critical to fail, as our food supplies, communities and ecosystems depend on it. IID has a continued interest in solutions that build upon partnerships, particularly those that respect agriculture and rural communities and not those that come at their expense.

We look forward to working on these shared interests and the supporting efforts of the Committee and Congress to ensure the long-term viability of the Colorado River as well as investments in the rapidly declining Salton Sea. We stand ready to assist in any manner possible.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit this testimony.