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Searles Valley Minerals Responds to State Approval of Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority's Flawed Groundwater Sustainability Plan

Trona, CA — The California Department of Water Resources (DWR) announced Thursday approval of a groundwater sustainability plan (GSP) submitted for the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Basin that clearly violates a key tenet of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA): prohibiting a groundwater management agency from determining water rights. The approval is granted despite DWR acknowledging that implementation of the GSP means “agricultural water use would be eliminated, and groundwater use would predominantly be for municipal and domestic uses and the U.S. Navy” and that it is “impossible” for DWR to assess the feasibility of the Authority’s expensive water importation project due to “uncertainty regarding financing and other project elements.”

Searles Valley Minerals (Searles), which has operated in the region for more than 140 years, opposed the plan, citing a proposed water replenishment fee that will increase Searles’ water costs 7,000 percent, to \$6 million a year. This outrageous fee could ultimately lead to the closure of Searles, triggering significant job loss in an area that is already described by the federal government as economically disadvantaged. In response to DWR’s decision, Burnell Blanchard, Vice President of Operations for Searles, released the following statement:

“It is illogical that DWR would approve a deficient groundwater sustainability plan that will not end the over-drafting of the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Basin. The plan underestimates the basin yield and ignores historic water rights, including those of Searles, which are the oldest in the basin. DWR itself acknowledged the plan’s serious deficiencies, and expressed doubts regarding the water import projects identified in the GSP, and that even a full implementation won’t be enough to bring the basin into balance within the SGMA statutory period.

Searles cannot afford the water replenishment fee that accompanies this plan and is at risk of closing its doors and eliminating hundreds of local jobs. Hundreds of residential households in the town of Trona and surrounding communities will also lose access to affordable drinking if Searles is deprived of its water rights.”

Searles is currently seeking a comprehensive adjudication of all groundwater rights in the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Basin. The purpose of the adjudication is to protect Searles' historic, prior and paramount groundwater rights, which are necessary for its continued business operations and the continued provision of domestic water to the Trona communities.

A ['Save Searles'](#) campaign has been in place for more than a year, representing a coalition of Searles' employees and their families as well as local residents and businesses from the City of Ridgecrest and the town of Trona— many of whom live in what the federal and state government have classified as underserved and severely disadvantaged communities already suffering from economic burdens. As people have learned more about the Authority's proposed actions, the ['Save Searles'](#) campaign has grown.