

# Calendar

## Water Grab

*Will San Diego Destroy Imperial Valley?*

**W**ater for the city is taken from the country. That's how the biggest potential water transfer of its kind in U.S. history would work. The agreement would provide up to 200,000 acre-feet of water annually to San Diego County. An acre-foot is enough water to flood an acre of land to a depth of one foot. Each of these acre-feet would come as the result of conservation efforts by the farmers of Imperial Valley.

It sounds unfair, but what they save, we get to use.

Before the transfer can begin, however, both the San Diego County

### LOCAL EVENTS

Water Authority and the Imperial Irrigation District must review and

assess its environmental impact.

David Hogan of the Center for Biological Diversity says the transfer will cause "significant harm to the Salton Sea and preclude the likelihood of its long-term restoration."

What does the transfer have to do with the continuing poor health of the state's largest lake? "The water that the farmers save means less irrigation runoff, which is the Salton Sea's only source of replenishment." Less water means saltier water and irreversible harm done to plant and animal life, say Hogan and other environmentalists.

The health of Imperial Valley children will be affected by the transfer, too, says Hogan. "If the transfer causes the sea to shrink, which is likely, there will be many square miles of lake bed exposed. Air quality is poor in the Imperial Valley as it is. It has one of the highest rates of childhood asthma in the country. Dust is a major contributor — dust mixed with other things, like agricultural chemicals." The dried-up lake will create more dust.

Given enough money, anything is

possible, isn't it? Couldn't the Salton Sea be "fixed" for a price?

"I've heard some big-time numbers," says Peggy Strand, an attorney who specializes in water law. "Something like \$1.6 billion."

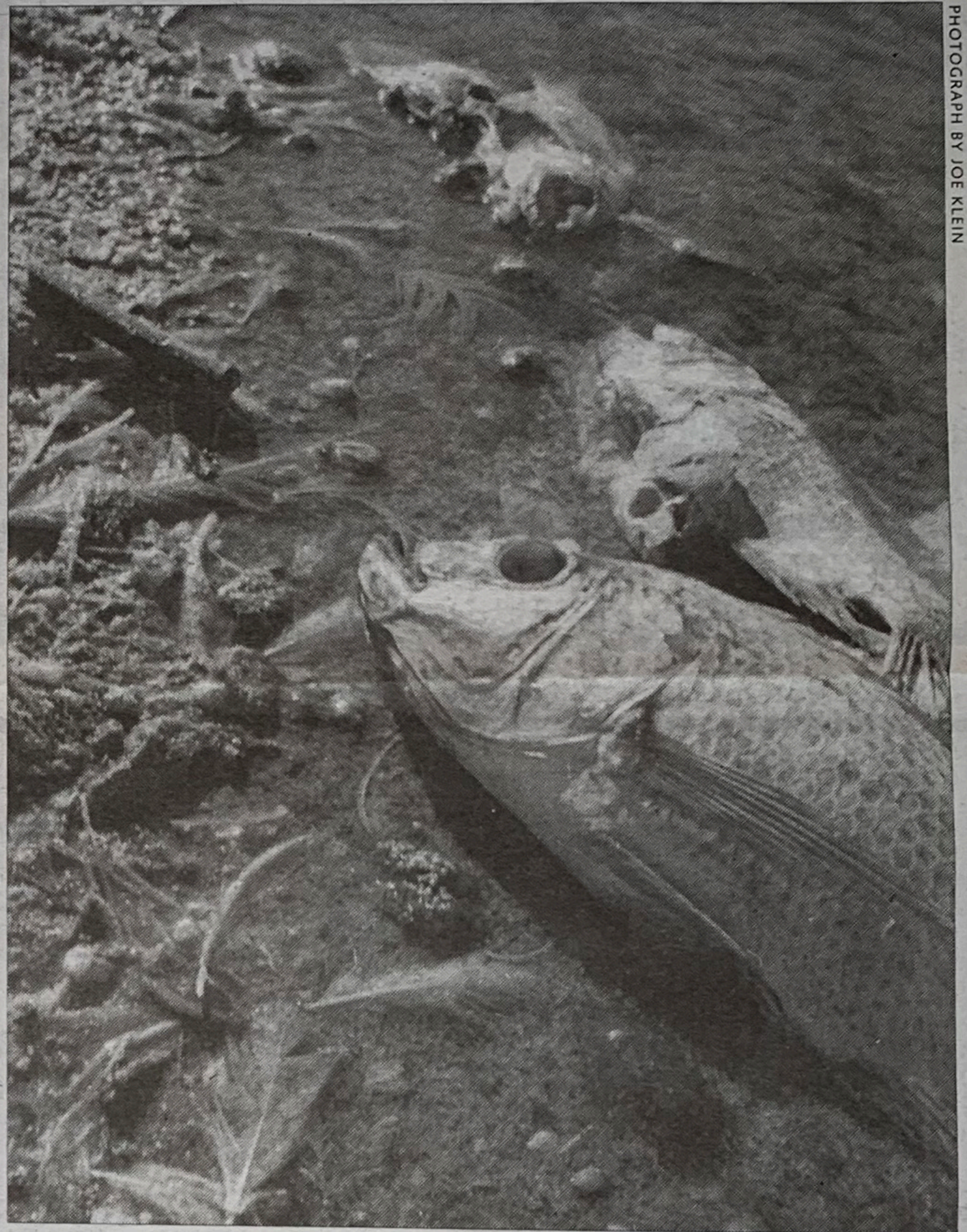
Of course, that's only the dollar cost of one piece of the transfer. Strand wonders about other, less quantifiable costs. "The transfer would change the economy and lifestyle of the Imperial Valley, a farming community with farming-community values," she says. "Now, I've heard talk about fallowing the land. That's going to affect how those folks make a living. Fallowing wasn't supposed to happen, originally."

Fallowing — leaving land unseeded during the growing season — would create yet more "particulate matter," Hogan says, although he sees this measure as a compromise. "To environmentalists it would be a fairly good deal because a certain amount of water would still flow to the Salton Sea."

The transfer is a central component of the California 4.4 Plan. The plan was a promise made by the state to reduce the amount of water it takes from the Colorado River. Regular use is 5.2 million acre-feet, even though the state is legally entitled to only 4.4 million. The Colorado River Water Use Plan will allow California to continue to receive surplus water over the next 15 years while the state implements programs that will help it reduce its dependence on the river.

As for the 200,000 acre-feet of the transfer, that isn't "new" water, Strand points out. "We're just moving an existing source to a place where it can be used purportedly more beneficially." But are those uses truly beneficial — and if so, beneficial to whom? Strand will ask these questions when she moderates Tuesday's panel discussion, which is part of a monthlong series on San Diego's major water source, the Colorado River.

"The transfer will bring a much more assured water supply to San Diego," says Hogan, one of the six panelists. "That means development, which wouldn't have been able to occur otherwise, because state law prohibits building where there isn't an adequate water supply. But San Diego doesn't need this water to facilitate reasonable new economic



Dead tilapia, Salton Sea

growth, because conservation is the key."

The "key" for Stuart Hurlbert, a board member of Californians for Population Stabilization, is something he says nobody likes to talk about: preventing overpopulation. A panelist later in the series, Hurlbert says he will be sure to bring up the high fertility rates of immigrants.

"I got notorious for being outspoken a few years ago, when I was invited to give talks on our Salton Sea research," the SDSU biology professor says. "I'd talk about algae for five minutes, fish for five minutes, and population growth and immigration for the rest of the time. I could hear people whispering, 'Let's not invite him again.' But I'll always bring up population. While ecologists like myself are perfectly happy studying environmental degradation and pretending to offer long-term solutions, we do understand the big picture, even though many of us are reluctant to speak out. But if we fund

an engineering project to fix the sea, we're making a mistake as taxpayers. Fifty years from now — I'm sorry: we'll need the water from the Imperial Valley."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Panel Discussions:**  
**"Moving Waters: The Colorado River & The West"**  
**Tuesday, April 16: "The Story of the Imperial Valley-San Diego Water Transfer"**  
**Tuesday, April 23: "Dreams of a Big City: Water Politics and San Diego County Growth"**  
**Wednesday, April 24: "What will be the Fate of the Salton Sea?"**  
**6:30-8:00 p.m.**  
**San Diego Public Library**  
**820 E Street, downtown**  
**Free**  
**Info: 619-236-5800 or**  
**www.movingwaters.org**



Salton City (sea area)

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE KLEIN

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

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