

Dinner Address by Geoffrey McQuilkin, Mono Lake Committee Co-Executive Director  
to the Walker Lake Summit, organized by Senator Harry Reid  
April 2, 2002

Good evening! It's exciting to be here for the Walker Lake Summit and to have spent the day with such an enthusiastic, knowledgeable group of people and to be here tonight with Senator Reid and so many influential individuals.

I'm here tonight to share some of the history of the Mono Lake protection effort and offer some insights on how the lessons that we learned at Mono can inform the hard work ahead here at Walker Lake.

What happened at Mono Lake is a benchmark—a watershed in its own right—in the history of water rights and water use in California and the West. In the early 1900s, Los Angeles bought up virtually all the water rights in the Mono Basin, and began diverting water into its aqueduct in 1941. Soon thereafter four of Mono's five year-round tributaries were bone dry and the lake began a steady fall that stretched to 45 vertical feet (modest by Walker Lake standards, but very significant). Salinity more than doubled, shooting upward toward 100 g/l, making the lake 2.5 times saltier than the ocean.

Like Walker Lake, the native wildlife was severely impacted and faced destruction. Like Walker Lake, birds that depend on the lake during lengthy migratory journeys were threatened. Like Walker Lake, a recreation-based economy that depended on the lake was stressed. Like Walker Lake, the argument was made that it was too late, too complicated, too expensive, too unrealistic to do anything about the problem. And, as I hope we see at Walker Lake, a coalition of groups pushed back, found answers, and forged a new life for a rare, unusual, ecologically critical inland sea.

There is no magic solution for Walker Lake, of course. But it is helpful to review what worked at Mono Lake for ideas.

The first Mono Lake T-shirts said "Mono Lake—it's worth saving." Walker Lake T-Shirts, I've noticed, are similar: "Walker Lake ... worth saving." Fresh or salty, Great Basin lakes like these are neglected, misunderstood, and generally underappreciated. Even the Great Salt Lake suffers this problem. I was there recently and of the lifetime residents I asked, none even knew where to visit the lake.

That phrase—worth saving—sums up much of the challenge: convincing people that there's something of value here that will soon be lost. Once people visit these lakes, once they experience them, they are amazed and impressed. And once they care about them, they want to protect them. This conference is a sign that, with Walker Lake, that message is reaching people.

So what worked at Mono Lake?

First you have to understand the lake. Scientific research is the foundation of the entire effort to protect Mono Lake. Science revealed the many unique aspects of Mono Lake,

from tufa towers to Eared Grebe migrations to efflorescent salt flats that cause toxic dust storms, allowing us to say why the lake is worth saving and what the problems were and would be due to excessive water diversions. Science also stretched our understanding of the problem itself, broadening us from concern about the lake to understanding and being concerned about the massive losses of streamside habitat on Mono's diverted tributaries, to realizing the tremendous damage done to waterfowl before anyone showed up to really worry (how bad? Consider a waterfowl migration that today is 1% — 1% — of its historic size of a million birds).

Science also allowed the Committee to formulate a real-world position on what the solution was to the problem. Sure, the solution was water, but how much water? The Mono Lake Committee never wanted all the water back in the lake. The Committee never wanted as much water as could be wrangled out of LA back in the lake. The Committee wanted enough water to protect the ecological resources of the Mono Lake—and, using science, it investigated and defined and put a precise number on that amount of water.

Second, you need to help people make that realization that the lake is worth saving. Early in the Mono Lake effort, David Gaines essentially asked LA: can't we share the water? The answer: no, it's too late, not practical, too expensive, not legal—and why would anyone care anyway. 20 years later, tens of thousands Californians and many public leaders wanted to see Mono Lake saved, and it was.

There's never a good argument for destroying a lake. Fresh, salty, or somewhere in between, lakes are too important to lose, especially here in the dry Great Basin. The proposal that the world would be a better place by trading away Mono Lake for Los Angeles was unacceptable on the face of it. But to share why a lake is worth saving you have to get down to the real-world reasons destruction is unacceptable—the threats posed, for example, to the birds, the brine shrimp, the volcanic islands, the wetlands, the streams, the tufa towers, the local economy.

At Mono Lake, all these specifics had to be explained in great detail, again and again. The explaining happened in a lot of ways: in the press, on daily natural history walks, in our public information center, on the pages of the Mono Lake Newsletter, and through the Mono Lake slideshow presented to just about any group that would listen—and a few the wouldn't.

The key is to share all that information. The *secret* is to show that you love the place yourself while doing it. You have to love talking to the elderly couple that used to throw rocks from the highway into the lake before it receded a mile. You have to be excited to talk to that student with the term paper due tomorrow. When someone asks, you have to know where that little spring is just east of that sandy area near that willow clump. You have to know the place.

Third, you need a strategy to achieve protection. Unavoidably, at Mono Lake, a piece of the strategy was legal, and we were fortunate that it became groundbreaking for California. Many avenues were tried, and two were successful. The first related to state Fish and Game codes, which state that dam operators must allow enough water to pass to keep fish downstream in good condition. That four of Mono's streams were ever allowed

to go bone dry lay in old water politics. So when the El Nino years of the early 1980s came, runoff exceeded the capacity of the aqueduct, water and fish flowed over the diversion dams, and the codes were used in court by the Committee, California Trout, and others to stop those streams from being shut down again.

The big legal argument, however, lay in the state constitution. When bodies of water like Mono Lake are involved, California as a state has an obligation to protect the public trust—the wildlife, recreational, and aesthetic values. Public trust responsibility cannot be given away, but the fact that the state failed to consider the public trust values of Mono Lake when issuing water rights to Los Angeles stood as a glaring failure.

In partnership with the National Audubon Society, the Committee filed a suit that went to the California Supreme Court and created a precedent in water rights. The court wrote: “The human and environmental uses of Mono Lake—uses protected by the Public Trust doctrine—deserve to be taken into account. Such uses should not be destroyed because the state mistakenly thought itself powerless to protect them.” Los Angeles’ water rights would have to be reevaluated as a result. The State Water Resources Control Board took on the task and produced the 1994 decision set a higher management level for Mono Lake, required restoration of the streams, and allowed the continued diversion of some water to the city.

Litigation is but one piece of the strategy that led to success at Mono Lake. Many of the other pieces you are familiar with: public involvement, media attention, legislation, agency review, fundraising. Many of those pieces, in fact, can be planned and put into action better than I can suggest by folks here in this room tonight. I think I need not dwell on them. Let me instead emphasize the strategic component that made the Mono Lake protection effort unique and uniquely compelling: solutions.

The Mono Lake Committee never said: Mono Lake is a special place that must be protected and Los Angeles must figure out how to get by with less water.

In fact, the Committee always said: Mono Lake is a special place that must be protected and Los Angeles can do it at minimal cost through conservation and water reclamation programs. The conservation programs include deploying low flush toilets citywide and implementing best management practices. Reclamation involves tertiary treatment of waste water to replace fresh Sierra water for industrial uses and groundwater recharge. With reclamation, LA has the ability to reuse water in the urban system, helping drought-proof it as well.

Those ideas came early on. And when LA replied, nice idea but it’ll never work, we participated in the panels and worked on the committees and ran the numbers to show how it could work. And when the reply came: great, but it’s too expensive, we worked with legislators to make more than \$60 million available for the facilities—provided the water saved was credited to Mono Lake.

That \$60 million was in many ways the piece that made all the difference because anyone—anyone—looking at the Mono Lake issue saw a problem with a solution and simply asked: how fast can this be wrapped up. The Department of Water and Power saw

it too, didn't like what they saw, and through delays let \$24 million slip away. But it finally bought into the plan. And today the Department and the City are extremely proud of the fact that they use the same amount of water as in the early 1970s—despite adding a million residents to the city's population.

It took 20 years to do all that and we are proud today to be still working on these facilities and conservation programs. It takes a lot of work no question. But that work created an extremely stable result for Mono Lake.

What the Mono Lake Committee learned is that ideas are cheap, but good ideas are only slightly more expensive. A good idea for a solution just didn't go that far on its own. We had to embrace Los Angeles, work with the City we had to make the City's legitimate concern for its water supply our own concern, and we had to show that those good ideas could be done, and we had to make those good ideas into reality. Telling the city how to run their water business, in short was not enough; we had to show it would work, get the money, see the conservation programs put into place, and help celebrate the results.

Protecting Mono Lake wasn't about trying to get rid of Los Angeles as a water user, and protecting Walker Lake isn't about trying to get rid of agriculture as a water user. Our opponents wanted to portray us that way, but they couldn't because we were looking for solutions to LA's real water needs as much as we were looking for water for Mono Lake. It was a highly successful approach because it was honest, and I see the seeds of it here again at Walker Lake. My advice: work diligently on a comprehensive solution that addresses real water needs up and down the river starting with Walker Lake.

There's another lesson learned at Mono Lake that is particularly relevant here. At Mono, Los Angeles had to learn to live within bounds. It can have some Mono Lake water but not all the water. The thing to remember is that even with all the water, the city would still have had to learn to live within limits. Now it is doing so with a vibrant, recovering ecosystem at the other end of its aqueduct. It could have had to do the same thing with a toxic saline sump at the top of the aqueduct.

The point simply is: Overallocated watersheds have to deal with the problem sooner or later. We did it sooner, and today we have Mono Lake to show for it.

But why not just write off one lake? Let it decline, go highly saline, dry up? Isn't that the price of progress? For those who don't give a darn about Walker Lake, I have this message from our experience in Eastern California: you don't have to care, but you still have to deal with the problem. Not caring about the problem of a dying lake does not make the problem go away.

Let me give a few examples that show why.

At Mono Lake, Los Angeles ultimately committed 60,000 acre-feet of water and several million dollars to fund a restoration program. In comparison, at Owens Lake, Los Angeles has for decades avoided, delayed, and otherwise tied up the process of dealing with the toxic dust storms that come from the lakebed—one of the liabilities resulting from excessive diversions. So they've 1) had staff dealing with the problem for decades

and 2) now committed up to 40,000 acre-feet of water and a \$250 million dollars to solve the problem. Today 5,300 bubbler sprinklers and 23 million feet of drip tubing are spreading that water and Los Angeles is in the business of farming 2,500 acres of saltgrass. They denied the problem right up to the turn of the century (and regarding some points, right up to today) but the problem did not go away.

At the Salton Sea, the Bureau of Reclamation puts the cost of handling the problems there in the range of \$250 million to \$1.5 billion, with no plan yet in place and the prospect of water transfers from the Imperial Irrigation District confounding the search. Solutions will have to be found including, quite likely, fallowing of land.

Let's look at the Colorado River for a moment. The Colorado River Delta is almost entirely decimated. A miniscule piece of the 2 million acre wetland today survives on a trickle of water. It unarguably was and could be again one of the richest biological resources in the west. And if Walker Lake is complicated, the Delta is even more immensely complicated, involving 7 states, 2 nations, and a river overallocated in the millions of acre-feet. But the destruction of the delta is a big problem, it isn't going away, and even water agencies like the Southern Nevada Water Authority concede the delta must be part of debates about how to allocate Colorado River water.

So did Los Angeles benefit long-term from evading the Mono Lake problem for 20 years? No. Has Los Angeles benefited long-term from evading the Owens Lake problem for decades longer? No. Does the Imperial Irrigation District benefit from putting off solutions for the Salton Sea? No. Will the Western states achieve long-term benefit from ignoring the Colorado Delta? No. Will anyone achieve long-term benefits from ignoring the Walker Lake problem? I suggest clearly the answer is no.

Only one thing makes problems go away: real, workable, effective solutions. And we need those solutions before the Mono Lakes out there become the Owens Lakes. So it's extremely exciting to be at this summit and see the search for those solutions taking such a big leap forward.

When you stand at the shore of Walker Lake and gaze southwestward over Mt. Grant, remember the good things that have happened at Mono Lake. Tonight, the message I bring is ultimately short and simple: cooperative solutions and lots of hard work were successful at Mono Lake. Building on the energy and potential partnerships here in this room tonight, they can be successful again at Walker Lake.

Thank you.