



MONO LAKE COMMITTEE

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November 30, 2022

Anselmo Collins

Senior Assistant General Manager - Water System
Los Angeles Department of Water and Power
111 N. Hope Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

RE: Request to assist with emergency protection of nesting birds and lake water quality at Mono Lake

Sent via email to: Anselmo.Collins@ladwp.com

Dear Mr. Collins,

Mono Lake provides vital habitat to millions of migratory and nesting birds, is a critical resource on the Pacific Flyway, and is recognized for its national, international, and hemispheric ecological significance. The surface level of Mono Lake today is 6,378.4 feet above sea level, an alarmingly low level that results from legacy impacts of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's (LADWP) water diversions, accentuated by recent drought.

This low lake level jeopardizes the safety of one of the world's largest nesting California Gull colonies by landbridging nesting islands, thus exposing eggs and chicks to predation during the upcoming nesting season. This situation is of significant concern and the Committee is collaborating with management agencies including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife on proactive actions to protect the gulls. Additionally, due to the low lake level, salinity has increased to levels that exceed federal and state water quality standards. LADWP's diversion of water from Mono Lake's tributary streams directly affects lake level by reducing inflow to the lake.

Given these emergency conditions, **the Mono Lake Committee respectfully requests that the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power help protect nesting birds and lake water quality by voluntarily reducing Mono Basin water exports until the emergency conditions are alleviated, specifically by suspending the export of water diverted from Rush and Lee Vining creeks and delivering that water to Mono Lake instead.**

In the coming runoff year, suspending surface water export means leaving 4,500 acre-feet of water in the Mono Basin for Mono Lake, representing less than 1% of

the City's annual water consumption while making an urgent difference to the security of the nesting colony. LADWP would continue to receive approximately 10,000 acre-feet of groundwater captured in the Mono Craters tunnel in the year ahead.

An emergency situation currently faces the nesting California Gull population—one of the world's largest—during the soon-to-begin 2023 nesting season. Without action, there is a high probability of coyotes accessing the nesting colony and depredating gull nests (which are on the ground) and chicks (which are flightless until at least mid-July), which will impact the population's reproductive success and likely cause nesting ground abandonment and long-term colony disruption. Even a single coyote accessing the nesting islets could be catastrophic for reproductive success of the gulls.

The coyotes are able to access the nesting islands due to the legacy impacts of LADWP's water diversions, accentuated by recent drought, that lowered the level of Mono Lake, and exposed the previously submerged lakebed that forms the landbridge between the shore and nesting islands. The nesting islands will be protected from predator access when past LADWP water diversion impacts have been mitigated by the lake recovering to the mandated management level of 6,392 feet as required by the State Water Resources Control Board.

The lake is currently 14 feet below this sustainable level and the landbridge has expanded significantly toward the nesting islands. In 2023 the lake will be lower than during the 2022 nesting season. Coyotes do not need a completely dry landbridge to access the islands. Rather, evidence from recent years shows the coyotes will wade through water and even swim short distances to access gull nesting sites. Moreover, once coyotes learn that the nesting areas provide a source of food, they may go to even greater lengths (e.g., wading deeper, swimming farther) to access the site.

To proactively protect the nesting colony in 2023, the Committee is collaborating with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California State Parks, and others to install temporary electric fencing to attempt to steer coyotes away from the at-risk nesting gulls. While this method proved successful in 2017, fencing is not foolproof; additionally, it will become ineffective if the landbridge grows substantially due to further lake level decline.

Therefore, it is imperative to keep the lake from dropping any lower than it already has and LADWP is in a unique position to join this effort and directly benefit the lake level by suspending the export of water diverted from Rush and Lee Vining creeks and delivering that water to the lake instead.

LADWP action will also beneficially address a second serious situation that has emerged this year. Mono Lake salinity levels have increased beyond the maximum permitted by the federal Clean Water Act antidegradation policy. In Decision 1631, the State Water Resources Control Board designated Mono Lake an "Outstanding National Resource Water," one of only two in the state. This Tier III designation set a maximum salinity of 85 g/l, corresponding to a lake level of 6,379.3 feet. Mono Lake's current salinity is higher than 85 g/l. Thus, suspending export of water diverted from tributary streams benefits LADWP by avoiding actions that would further degrade water quality in violation of the standard.

The Mono Lake Committee recognizes that historic drought and dry conditions are impacting both Mono Lake and Los Angeles. Los Angeles has made impressive water efficiency progress in the decades since the State Water Board's Mono Lake decision, using the same amount of water as 50 years ago despite significant population increase. The recent water conservation successes of Los Angeles residents to the drought are notable and studies show even more conservation can be accomplished. The Mono Lake Committee continues work on our pledge to help secure funding for Los Angeles to support additional conservation efforts that will improve affordability of water for low-income households while expanding capacity to provide water to protect Mono Lake.

The situation at Mono Lake is serious. The Mono Lake Committee requests LADWP assistance by contributing something only LADWP can: water. We urge LADWP to act on this request quickly by informing the Mono Lake Committee and the State Water Board of your response as soon as possible. The Committee is already working on the gull protection fence and we expect to brief the State Water Board on this urgent situation soon.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. McQuilkin', written in a cursive style.

Geoffrey McQuilkin
Executive Director

CC

Cynthia McClain-Hill, LADWP Board President

Martin Adams, General Manager and Chief Engineer