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Dust Up

As Los Angeles officials reconsider how to settle the Owens Lake dust, conservationists are concerned about how wildlife might fare.

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

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In most places dust is just dust-dirty and annoying. In Owens Valley, it has caused decades of strife. Despite recent successes by conservationists to return water to the nearly dry Owens Lake, Los Angeles officials are again looking to siphon the area's water.

Last month, they negotiated a deal to replace some shallow flooded areas, [which double as bird habitat](http://www.audubonmagazine.org/multimedia/dust-buster) (<http://www.audubonmagazine.org/multimedia/dust-buster>), with an experimental tillage system that would compound dirt into damp piles to abate the dust. How this system could affect the recovering ecosystem is still unclear: [The 22-page document](http://gbuapcd.org/owenslake/2011SCR/StipulatedJudgment20141124.pdf) (<http://gbuapcd.org/owenslake/2011SCR/StipulatedJudgment20141124.pdf>) on it mentions wildlife just once.

"This is a significant win for ratepayers and our environment in both Los Angeles and the Owens Valley," Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti [announced in a public statement](http://www.ladwpnews.com/go/doc/1475/2419666/City-of-Los-Angeles-and-Great-Basin-Unified-Air-Pollution-Control-District-Reach-Historic-Comprehensive-Agreement-on-Owens-Lake-Dust-Mitigation) (<http://www.ladwpnews.com/go/doc/1475/2419666/City-of-Los-Angeles-and-Great-Basin-Unified-Air-Pollution-Control-District-Reach-Historic-Comprehensive-Agreement-on-Owens-Lake-Dust-Mitigation>).

After a century of stealth, talk of an environmental victory by a Los Angeles official makes Owens residents nervous. The trouble began in 1913, when Los Angeles city officials opened an aqueduct that diverted water from the lake's feeder streams to the young metropolis 200 miles away. The diversions transformed Owens Lake into a 110 square-mile dust bowl. At once ingenious engineering and scandalous exploitation, the water grab launched a battle over the health and environment of the rural region. For much of the 20th century, clouds of arsenic-laden dust sickened residents in the remote southern California valley while birds and other wildlife abandoned the area.

By 2013 a [David-versus-Goliath battle](http://www.audubonmagazine.org/articles/birds/california-lake-becomes-stopover-spot-again) (<http://www.audubonmagazine.org/articles/birds/california-lake-becomes-stopover-spot-again>) resulted in the city of Los Angeles paying more than \$1.2 billion for a dust-abatement program. It was championed by the [Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District](http://www.gbuapcd.org) (<http://www.gbuapcd.org>), a government agency representing three California counties with compromised air quality. The agreement forced the city to return some water to the dry lakebed, creating reliable habitat for tens of thousands of migrating birds.

Now some worry that the accord, reached behind closed doors on November 14th, could undo the habitat that has grown up around the lake's shallow pools. The new plan to abate dust uses a tillage system that, while called innovative and organic, offers no habitat for birds.

Here's how it works: Tractors pulling enormous agriculture disks will dig damp ground into furrows as deep as three feet. The moist dirt will be tilled into heavy, wet-clay clods, some bigger than basketballs, and tossed into five-foot mounds. The clods, designed to capture the loose dust and retain it for years, will eventually break down. At that point the water system previously used for shallow flooding will spray the furrows and repeat the process.

The agreement between Los Angeles and the Great Basin air district is focused on reducing air pollution, not benefitting wildlife, says Ted Schade, enforcement officer who negotiated the deal for the district. The new plan will save the city nearly 3 billion gallons of water a year--enough to serve 43,000 people--and may eventually save as much as 10 billion gallons.

Andrew Morin, an environmental activist who lives near Owens Lake, doubts the new program will result in anything but wildlife losses. "You cannot save three-billion gallons of water and not affect wildlife. It's impossible," Morin says.

A management plan developed over years of negotiating with Los Angeles establishes a baseline of wildlife habitat across the entire lake. It identifies the best places, allowing managers to reduce water in marginal areas to maximize habitat quality elsewhere, says Andrea Jones, director of bird conservation for Audubon California.

Schade says any changes for wildlife would have to be approved by the State Lands Commission, which owns the lakebed and oversees a separate agreement to maintain habitat on the lake. If dust control reduces the habitat in one place it must be increased elsewhere. "It's a shell game," says Schade.

Michael Prather, a birder who helped found Audubon's Eastern Sierra Chapter, has watched Least Sandpipers, Northern Harriers, and American Avocets return to Owens Lake as the city flooded one area after another in compliance with the court-mandated dust controls. What was dry as bleached bone for nearly a century now has enough water to be a critical stopover for birds traveling on the inland Pacific Flyway. After decades of dodging city-built roadblocks, Prather believes Los Angeles officials are sincere about maintaining the mudflats, shallow pools and ponds that have made Owens Lake an [Audubon Important Bird Area](http://ca.audubon.org/new-opportunities-birds-owens-lake) (<http://ca.audubon.org/new-opportunities-birds-owens-lake>).

The areas slated for tilling have marginal value for birds, Prather says, and he's hopeful the new dust-abatement process can proceed without hurting bird habitat. If water not used in the new tilled areas is used in places prized by nesting Snowy Plovers, colonies of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and migrating Snow Geese, it may even improve bird habitat, Prather says. It's not yet clear, however, whether the tilling project will force L.A. officials to increase water returns in other parts of Owens Lake.

Either way, Prather and other Audubon members will be closely monitoring implementation of the Los Angeles agreement, expected to start this month.

"We've choked on dust while they made billions on our water," he says. "We definitely want to keep the wildlife we've got."

Editor's Note: This story was updated on Dec. 15 to incorporate information from Andrea Jones.

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