

Sustainability of the Western Salt Company Salt Works, San Diego, California ***By Carrie J. Gregory***

For the historic landscape of the Western Salt Company Salt Works (Salt Works), sustainability means continuing operations. The Salt Works is a unique local industry that is economically stable and valuable to the southern California region. It is an important ecological habitat that also has utility as an open space. Significant for its role in the solar salt industry in California, the Salt Works embodies the distinctive characteristics of a solar salt processing facility.

The Salt Works has been in operation for more than 100 years, producing solar evaporated salt from ponds at the southern end of San Diego Bay. A complex interaction between human activity and the natural environment, the process has remained nearly the same for more than a century. San Diego Bay is one of a few unique locations in the United States where solar salt evaporation is economically feasible. The Salt Works is an industrial district that includes all of the necessary buildings, structures, and landscape for the mining and production of commercial-grade salt by way of the solar evaporation process.

Ponds cover most of the 1,300-acre site, which consists of lands both above and below the mean high tide level. All but one of the buildings is clustered on the eastern shore of the property. The buildings were constructed by Salt Works employees during the period of 1916 to 1918. The ponds were engineered in 1916 and largely expanded in 1933 and 1940. The architecture of the buildings and engineering of the ponds are vernacular, reflecting their related function and use.

The California salt industry began in the 1850s, but it did not become a commercial industry in the state until the 1860s. The salt industry began in San Diego in 1871. Founded in 1902, the Western Salt Company produced more than five percent of California's salt in 1918, more than six percent in 1922, eight percent in 1926, and ten percent in 1932. By the late 1950s, the Salt Works was second only to the plants in San Francisco in solar salt production from seawater.

The Salt Works is environmentally friendly. San Diego Bay has natural salt marshes, and the salt ponds are part of a 130-year old ecosystem. It is a haven for migratory birds and invertebrates. Eight hundred acres of the Salt Works are part of a 2,600-acre wildlife refuge operated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, designed to protect the several species of threatened and endangered birds that live and feed in the salt ponds.

The Salt Works retains a high degree of integrity and is authentic in its use, character, and identity. It is a dynamic landscape of San Diego Bay that evolves as part of contemporary life and natural development. Continued use by the people whose traditions helped to shape the landscape of the Salt Works only enhances its significance. Its continued operation ensures the preservation of cultural and natural features, as well as human processes and natural systems.