Frequently Asked Questions

Direct Lithium Extraction, Our Health, and Our Community

Community members asked questions about direct lithium extraction (DLE), health, and changes in Imperial County. Here are answers based on what we learned from the Health Impact Assessment (HIA).

Environmental and Health Effects

1. Can DLE projects affect my health?

They could affect health in good and bad ways. New jobs and community funds may help support health. Air pollution, traffic, stress, or other changes may harm health. We do not know all the effects yet because large DLE projects are still new.

2. Will DLE make our air worse?

DLE may add some air pollution, with dust from construction being the most likely contributor. Federal, state and local regulations are in place to help lower dust and pollution. The HIA recommends checking air quality as direct lithium extraction projects grow.

3. Could DLE projects make breathing problems, like asthma, worse?

Air pollution and dust can make it harder to breathe. This can be a bigger concern for people with asthma or other lung problems. We do not yet know how much DLE projects and related growth may change local air quality.

4. Will DLE use water from the Salton Sea?

No. The lithium is found in hot, salty water deep underground. This water is called geothermal brine. The geothermal brine is not connected to the Salton Sea.

5. Could DLE projects affect our drinking water?

The HIA does not expect the DLE projects to harm drinking water since the geothermal brine used in the extraction process is located a mile underground. This is well below the water tables and drinking water in the region. However, spills or leaks at the surface could affect water. This is why the HIA recommends continued water monitoring.

6. What happens to the geothermal brine after lithium is removed?

The brine goes back into the deep geothermal reservoir underground. This is part of a closed-loop system. The brine does not get put into the Salton Sea.

7. Are chemicals used to remove lithium?

Yes. DLE uses chemicals and other materials to help remove lithium. Federal, state and local regulations guide how these chemicals are stored, used, and moved. The HIA recommends continued monitoring to help protect people and the environment.

8. Does DLE create waste?

Some lithium projects may create solid and liquid waste. Some waste may be reused or recycled. Other waste must be taken to places that are allowed to receive it. Federal, state and local regulations guide how waste is stored, moved or disposed of.

Our Community and Direct Lithium Extraction

9. Will there be more trucks and traffic because of DLE?

Possibly. New construction and industry may bring more trucks and traffic. Community members told us this is a concern. Project plans include truck routes and road improvements to help reduce impacts on the community.

10. Will direct lithium extraction projects create jobs for local people?

Direct lithium extraction projects will likely create new jobs. Many residents said they want these jobs to go to local people. The HIA recommends local hiring and job training, but we do not yet know how many jobs will go to Imperial County residents.

11. Will our community get money from lithium extraction?

Yes. California has a tax on lithium extraction. Some of this money must go to communities affected by lithium projects. The HIA recommends making sure community benefits are clear and meaningful.

12. Could industry growth make it harder to get health care?

It could. More people living and working in Imperial County may mean more people need health care. This could make current access worse. However, growth could also bring most healthcare services to the community. The HIA recommends planning for health services as the area grows.

Keeping Our Community Informed and Protected

13. Who will make sure companies doing DLE follow the rules?

Local, state, and federal agencies have processes to oversee different parts of DLE projects. They can review permits, inspect sites, and check environmental information. The HIA recommends continuous monitoring and public reporting to help make sure these processes work well.

14. How will we know if our air, water, or community health changes?

The HIA recommends checking air, water, soil, and community health over time. It also recommends sharing this information with the public in ways that are easy to understand. The community should also be told about environmental problems that could affect health.

15. Why can't the health impact assessment tell us exactly what will happen?

Large DLE projects are still new. There is not much research about how they may affect health over time. We also do not know exactly how future projects will grow. The HIA recommends that we keep checking, learning, and sharing new information.