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Lithium Valley and Imperial Valley
College Students:

Bridging the Gap Between Youth Priorities and Policy



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About Us

Who we are

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About Us

UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) was established in 1969 to have a systemic impact on the campus, within higher education, and across society through original research on the Chicano and Latino communities in the U.S. Its research mission is supported by five distinct components: a library with special collections archive, an academic press, collaborative research projects, public programs and community-based partnerships, and competitive research support. The CSRC strives to balance interdisciplinary and applied research in ways that can impact traditional academic departments and disciplines. Through all of these efforts, the CSRC exemplifies UCLA's institutional priorities – academic excellence, civic engagement, and diversity – as a foundation for research that makes a difference.

Latino Data Hub

The Latino Data Hub is a reliable source of information about important issues facing Latinos. Drawing primarily on the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the Latino Data Hub offers over 130 indicators developed and maintained by the UCLA LPPI research team. In the summer of 2024, the Latino Data Hub Action Lab welcomed its first youth cohort, a partnership between the UCLA LPPI Latino Data Hub, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's California Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project, and the Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition.

About the Thriving Youth Survey

What is the Thriving Youth Survey?

The Thriving Youth Survey (TYS) seeks to gather and synthesize data to inform health, education, labor, and civic interventions to help young California residents thrive and contribute to the future of their communities.



TYS at Imperial Valley College

The data collected for the Thriving Youth Survey is from a sample of 1,262 Imperial Valley College students aged 18 and older (87% are 18-24) surveyed between April and June 2024. While this sample only represents the voice of young college students in Imperial Valley, young folks (under 30) in Imperial County make up nearly half (45%) of the population. Thus, these findings might shed light on broader community perspectives.

Word Bank

Direct Lithium Extraction (DLE)

A relatively new and experimental method of lithium extraction that uses chemical or physical processes to directly remove lithium from brine. DLE is designed to be more environmentally friendly by reducing land and water use, time to market, and carbon emissions.

Geothermal Brine

A natural, superheated fluid found underground that contains dissolved minerals, including lithium, in the Salton Sea region.

Lithium

A soft, silvery-white metal found in mineral components such as hard rock, sediments, and specific water sources.

Lithium Extraction Excise Tax

A tax on lithium extraction was established by Senate Bill 125, with the revenue directed to a specific fund.

Lithium Extraction Excise Tax Fund

A fund created to collect revenue from the Lithium Extraction Excise Tax. The fund's revenue is allocated for specific purposes, including Salton Sea restoration and distribution to affected counties.

Lithium Valley

A term used to describe the Salton Sea and the surrounding area where lithium extraction is anticipated to occur, reflecting the region's potential importance in the lithium industry.

Salton Sea

A large, shallow, hyper-saline lake in Imperial County, California, around which the lithium extraction activities are concentrated.

Salton Sea Known Geothermal Resource Area (SSKGRA)

A specific zone on the southeastern bend of the Salton Sea where lithium deposits are located in geothermal brine.

Senate Bill 125

Key legislation that established the Lithium Extraction Excise Tax to replace local taxes on lithium extraction. The bill also details how the revenue from the tax is to be allocated.

Introduction

Due to the rapid rate of technological advancement, Lithium has become an invaluable resource at the center of a new and developing industry in the Imperial and Coachella counties. Lithium Valley is set to completely change the economic landscape of the Imperial and Coachella Valleys with a projected 18 million metric tons of lithium located in the Salton Sea. Imperial Valley College (IVC) students have become key stakeholders as IVC is the first higher education institution to offer a lithium industry workforce training program in the Imperial Valley. Given that the first cohort of Lithium Valley's workforce will potentially be comprised of IVC alumni, both industry and government officials could benefit from listening to and incorporating IVC students' priorities and concerns regarding the development of Lithium Valley.

This short brief incorporates US Census data from the Latino Data Hub, sentiments from Imperial County residents at community meetings, Comite Civico del Valle (CCV) and Earthworks Environmental Justice in California's Lithium Valley report published in November 2023, and preliminary findings from the Thriving Youth Study, a youth participatory action research project by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.



Preliminary findings from the Thriving Youth Survey show that only 43% of respondents trust their local government officials to prioritize community needs as lithium developments change this region.¹⁹ This is critical since Imperial County's Lithium Excise Tax spending plan allocates 20% of revenue towards the Salton Sea Restoration Fund, which the California Natural Resources Agency manages. There is no current plan regarding the usage of these funds, and there is only a confirmed allocation towards this project. The remaining 80% of the tax revenue will be dispersed to Imperial and Coachella counties. Under Senate Bill 125, it is required that either county establish a method to distribute an amount of at least 30% to its communities that are most directly and indirectly impacted by the lithium extraction activities; this is known as the 15/15 Funding Plan.

Reviewing the raw data from the Thriving Youth Survey and the County's proposed usage of the tax revenue reveals significant differences between Imperial County's priorities and young college students' priorities. This brief covers three main issues that highlight young college students' priorities regarding the Lithium Valley project:

- 1.Addressing Environmental Impacts of Lithium Valley and Worsening Air Quality**
- 2.Uncertainty of Lithium Valley Job Opportunities for Local Workforce**
- 3.Young People Highly Prioritize Affordable Housing in the Region**



Environment and Health

Lithium extraction poses two major issues concerning the environment:

1) Air Quality

2) Water Usage

In an area with existing poor quality issues, the degradation of this air quality is threatened by lithium extraction. The Imperial County is already **designated as a “nonattainment area,”** failing to meet federal (National Ambient Air Quality Standards) and state (California Ambient Quality Standards) benchmarks for 8-hour ozone and particulate matter up to 10 micrometers in size (PM₁₀).¹ With much of this degradation occurring from the Salton Sea itself, the process of extracting lithium raises concerns. Energy Source Minerals' Environmental Impact Report estimates that approximately **179 vehicle trips will occur daily**, further contributing to harmful air emissions. In addition, this report estimates that lithium extraction will produce approximately 16,650.91 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year. While this falls below the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's and Imperial County's mitigation thresholds (25,000 and 20,000 metric tons/year, respectively), actual emissions may exceed projections.²

Air Quality

Poor air quality directly impacts residents. Over **50%** of Thriving Youth Survey respondents claimed to have **eye irritation**,³ and about **30%** expressed **breathing difficulties**.⁴ These risks are compounded by the fact that **7% of Imperial County residents are uninsured**, according to the Latino Data Hub, leaving vulnerable populations exposed to environmental health disparities. For instance, **15% of individuals who are noncitizens** are uninsured in Imperial County, an 8 percentage point difference from the total population.

Figure 1. Poor Air Quality Effects: Difficulty Breathing & Eye Irritation. Thriving Youth Survey, 2022.

Difficulty Breathing



Irritated Eyes



Water Usage

Secondly, the issue of freshwater consumption raises numerous concerns that have still not been answered by the most recent Lithium Valley Specific Plan. This report notes that Phase 1 **requires 42,000 acre-feet of water per year.**⁵ However, there is only an existing **18,620 acre-feet of water available** for new non-agricultural projects. Without a clear plan to secure more water, concerns over water being diverted from agriculture are ever present. Diverting water from agriculture to lithium extraction could contribute to the shrinking of the Salton Sea, thus releasing more **toxic dust and contributing to air pollution.**⁶ Proactive measures are critical to prevent cascading harm to public health, ecosystems, and the agricultural economy.

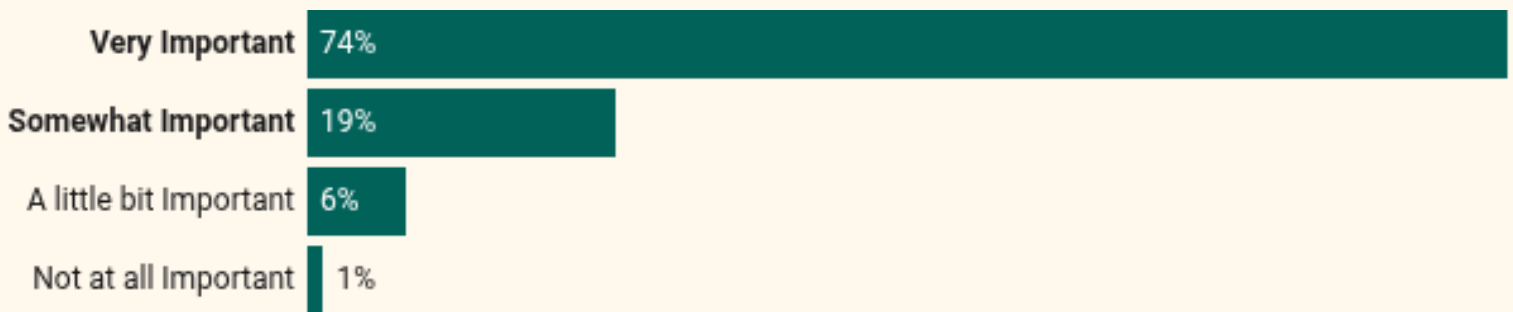
Where will this water come from?



Note: This image depicts a Lithium site under the Phase 1 process. It is important to note the fresh water reservoir as there are numerous concerns about where the Lithium Extraction Companies will be receiving this water from.

Employment

**Figure 2. Create Good Paying Jobs for Local Residents.
Thriving Youth Survey, 2022.**



[Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Lithium Valley presents a promising opportunity to create new jobs in the Imperial Valley, especially with the IVC Workforce Development program; however, residents are concerned about whether they will be prioritized for these jobs. Given the precedent set by the solar power industry's development in Imperial County, these concerns are well-founded, as it was estimated that only 20-30 permanent full-time positions per facility resulted from the development.⁷ **93% of IVC students believe that creating well-paying jobs in Imperial County is "somewhat" or "very" important.**⁸ With Imperial County's unemployment rate (14%) being double the state average (6.4%), it is crucial that lithium industry officials and local stakeholders work together to ensure these opportunities result in meaningful, long-term employment.

A similar issue is that the development of Lithium Valley may also affect an already-established local workforce, the agricultural sector. According to the Latino Data Hub, 10% of employed residents in Imperial Valley—approximately 6,000 workers—are employed in agriculture or related fields.⁹ Once the direct lithium extraction (DLE) process begins, the Imperial Irrigation District plans to set aside a specific amount of water for industrial use. However, the Earthworks Report warns that industrial water demand may exceed available non-agricultural demand. Reducing water availability threatens crop yields and agricultural jobs held by over 6000 individuals in Imperial County.



Therefore, while the lithium extraction project may bring new economic opportunities, it is crucial to carefully consider the balance between these opportunities and the potential risks to existing agricultural jobs. Resolving the issue of creating high-paying job opportunities will require a more complex solution than simply creating workforce training programs.

Housing Affordability

Through SB125, Imperial County has put forward the Good Neighbor Community Benefit Agreement (CBA), which aims to commit to six different pillars. These pillars include Local and Priority Hiring, Workplace Safety and Quality Standards, Education and Skill Building, Community Engagement, Advancing Infrastructure, and Supporting the Local Economy. Within these pillars lies the effort to provide the “Best Practice for Quality of Life,” which aims to provide residents of Imperial Valley with access to clean air, affordable and reliable water, and affordable housing.

Figure 3. Percent of IV Residents Experiencing Housing Cost Burdens.
Latino Data Hub, 2022.¹⁰

 Moderate  Severe

Rent Cost Burden

50% of
Renters    

Owned Housing Cost Burden

24% of
Home Owners        

**Moderate housing cost burden refers to the monthly housing costs ranging from 30-50% of monthly household income. Severe housing cost burden refers to the monthly housing costs exceeding 50% of monthly household income.¹¹*

While housing is an issue statistically, findings from the Thriving Youth Survey indicate that these statistics corroborate with individual sentiments towards housing. The Thriving Youth Survey found that the effort to increase access to affordable housing was tied for the third most important priority in the survey. **74% of these students** view building affordable housing as “**very important**,” with a combined total of **92%** of students who find building affordable housing as “**somewhat**” or “**very**” important to focus on.¹²

Figure 4. Building Affordable Housing for Imperial Valley Residents. Thriving Youth Survey, 2022.



[Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Housing affordability is an urgent priority to focus on as Imperial County is currently undergoing a housing crisis. Thus, it is important that the CBA carry out its vision of providing Imperial Valley residents with affordable housing.

Closing

With the Lithium Valley entering Phase 1 of its project this year, it is imperative that we integrate the voices of those who will form Lithium Valley's workforce and foster its future, our youth. The data presented shows that IVC students have a clear vision on how the spoils from Lithium Valley can improve their quality of life. Yet, according to the Thriving Youth Survey, only 43% trust their local government to prioritize community needs amid this development. Although this could be viewed as a discouraging metric, it can be seen as a call to involve young people in the decision-making process in a meaningful way.

To truly build a sustainable Lithium Valley, Imperial Valley must be included not only as the future workforce but also as present-day stakeholders. Ensuring that this project delivers benefits and protections for the local community requires transparent and community-centered action.



These steps and actions include:

- **Protecting Agricultural Jobs and Water Access:** The Imperial Irrigation District and Lithium operations must publish clear and transparent water usage plans. It must be ensured that existing water insecurity is not heightened and that the agricultural sector does not reap the consequences.
- **Developing and Enforcing Transparent Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs):** CBAs must provide regular public reports on the implementations and impacts of CBA initiatives to build trust with residents, especially those who express a limited trust in their government.
- **Mitigate Environmental and Health Harms:** Mitigation efforts must directly address known risks such as dust exposure from the Salton Sea and emissions from traffic.

These steps are merely the beginning. There must be active collaboration between Imperial County governmental officials and lithium operators to listen to the needs and wants of their community.

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