

Searles Valley Minerals still thriving after 150 years of mining

By Darla A. Baker dbaker@ridgecrestca.com
Apr 12, 2023



On April 3, the Honorable Tom Lackey from the 34th assembly district traveled to Trona to present Searles Valley Minerals with the CA Legislature Assembly Resolution No. 370. This resolution described the 150 year history of Searles Valley Minerals and then stated, "Be it resolved by Assembly Member Tom Lackey that Searles Valley Minerals be congratulated on its 150th anniversary and commended for its history of innovation and dedication to meeting the evolving needs of a national and global marketplace." Dated Feb. 14, 2023. Present to receive the honor were, from left, Josh Dubreuil, Karl Cleary, Assemblyman Tom Lackey, Steven Kourakos and Arzell Hale.

Courtesy photo



How many businesses can you name that have been operating for the past 150 years within the region?

Not many, that's for sure!

However, Searles Valley Minerals just recently celebrated its 150-year milestone as one of the nation's leaders in the production of soda ash, boron, salt and sodium sulfate.

These key minerals are found in the dry lake bed of Trona, Calif., and mined at Searles Valley Minerals' three operating plants: the West End Plant, the Trona Plant and the Argus Plant. In addition, mining is done through lake operations.

According to Arzell Hale who first went to work for Searles Valley in 1978 and serves as the company's director of government and public affairs, the plant employs approximately 600 individuals today. In its heyday of the 1970s, Searles Valley employed up to 1,400 individuals.

So, what makes the tiny town of Trona stand out from other, tiny towns on the West Coast?

"We have a very large reserve at our lake operations. Searles Valley Lake is a dry lake, and we have liquid brine under the ground that has all these minerals in it. We pump the brine into the plant and extract these minerals, then return the liquid back to the lake underground. It is an amazing reserve, and that is why we are here," Hale said.

A century and half later, the company continues to support global marketing by producing minerals used in common household products such as all glass products, televisions, cell phones, computers, clothes and more. In addition, the minerals are used in the production of cleaning supplies, fertilizers and even car windshields.

Searles Valley ships two million tons of products each year in 30,000 shipments that are transported by rail and truck throughout the United States as well as 52 other countries.

As with any business, Searles Valley has experienced its fair share of adversities including fires and a downturn in the town's economic environment. In more recent years, the company was hit with a double whammy: the first of which were a pair of devastating earthquakes that occurred back-to-back in Searles Valley on July 4, 2019 (6.4 foreshock) followed by a massive 7.1 earthquake the following day.

Following the earthquakes, all three plant sites were forced to cease production for 71 days as all sustained damage in the quakes.

"We lost several millions of dollars due to the earthquakes," Hale said. "It was difficult, but the employees kept coming to work every day."

And, then, came Covid.

"Covid... it hit us pretty hard, and a lot of our employees were involved, but right now, we do not have any problem with Covid," said Hale, adding, "It affected our markets for quite a while."

Between 450 to 500 of the employees that work for Searles Valley Minerals reside in Ridgecrest and make the 24-mile commute each day. The remainder of the workforce reside in Trona and make up a portion of the 1,647 souls that reside there.

The look of the town that surrounds the three plants has changed drastically from 150 years ago when John Searles discovered the minerals and started mining productions.

In 1914, the settlement was officially named Trona, and the company built homes, roads, a shopping center and a hospital to support the employees who lived there. In time, a movie theater was built, and a dance hall, library and school were built.

Time would take its toll on the township as the population began to dwindle, businesses began to close and the shopping center shuttered its doors.

The Trona School still holds classroom for students that remain in the area, and two restaurants give residents a choice to dine out. A hardware store now carries a select few grocery items, otherwise the people of Trona have to venture to Ridgecrest and beyond to purchase their daily needs.

Many of the homes were devastated or destroyed by the quakes, and sit as empty shells as reminders of years gone by when Trona was once a thriving, flourishing community.

But just past the weeds, the sagging homesteads and the fading painted windows of businesses that once welcomed customers inside to shop, you will see those three plants, huffing and puffing 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year as one of the nation's longest-standing, continuous mining operations.

Asked what the future holds for Searles Valley Minerals, Hale said, "The future is bright. I am optimistic."

Although he has 45 years with the company, Hale said he doesn't plan on retiring anytime soon.

Said Hale, "Every day of those 45 years, I looked forward to going to work because I love my job. How many people do you know that can say that?"

Not many, Arzell. Not many.