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SAVE THE SALT!

BONNEVILLE - THE WORLD'S FASTEST RACE COURSE - WILL BECOME USELESS IF ACTION ISN'T TAKEN NOW, SAYS ONE OF RODDING'S TOP AUTHORITIES.

PHOTO BY WILLIAM A. MOORE



The Bonneville Salt Flats, located approximately ninety air miles west of Salt Lake City, Utah, are a remarkable phenomenon of nature. They cover quite a large area and one small section that parallels the highway between Salt Lake City and Wendover, Utah, has been used for many years for automotive speed record attempts. Each winter the salt that forms the surface on which the course is laid out for the speed runs becomes partially or completely covered with water, depending on the amount of rainfall in the area. This water, moved back and forth by the strong winds that frequently blow across the flats, level and smooth the salt's surface. Then, summer's sun evaporates the water, leaving, in most instances, a smooth, hard surface over which an automobile rolls with minimum effort.

Quite often, a lake of some sort parallels the course that is dragged across the salt's surface but such a lake doesn't present any problems as long as it stays in place. The force that moves such a lake from place to place, or expands its area, is wind. This year, a lake not only paralleled the course's side farthest from the highway but it also curved across the course's ends, limiting the length of the usable salt to 7.8 miles. This is in contrast to course lengths as long as 14 miles that were available not too many years back. But water alone isn't to blame for shorter courses. Too much water is a rare occurrence and nothing more than an inconvenience. Something else, over which Mother Nature has no control, is shrinking the available area on which a course can be laid out. This shrinkage is a problem that common sense says should be solved, and solved quickly.

The thing that has been harming the flats for some years and that threatens to ruin them completely for speed events within a very few years and eliminate the salt entirely in the not too distant future is the constant draw on the salt by the potash company located at the flats' southeast end. To get the raw product for their processing plant, this company pumps brine, which is salt-laden water, that collects in deep canals dug in the flats into settling basins that are across the main highway. When the water evaporates, salt that remains in the basins is scooped up and hauled to the plant. Although the plant has been operating for just a few years, this process has removed so much salt from the area used for speed runs that the edges of the deposit have retreated a considerable distance from the natural boundaries of three of the area's sides. These boundaries are the mountains that border the area's northwest side, Floating Mountain at the northeast end, and a flat area at the southwest end. This depletion of

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the glistening white mineral isn't noticeable from ground level but is startlingly apparent from the air.

The canals in which the brine collects have a secondary effect of making the surface of the salt near them, and the portion of the course that parallels them, much rougher than it would be if they weren't there. The apparent reason for this is that the water that collects in the canals causes the salt in the area to dry faster than it should. But whatever the reason, the canals and the potash plant are slowly turning the salt flats into mud flats. This shouldn't be allowed to happen.

Few states in our Union have natural wonders that compare with the Bonneville Salt Flats. Actually, the flats are just about Utah's only claim to fame. There are other notable sights in the state, mostly man-made, but none that are as widely known. The many land speed records that have been established on the flats have made them famous the world over as the World's Fastest Race Course. No other state in the Union, nor country in the free world, has such an area. Lake Eyre, in Australia, is the only area that comes close to it as a high-speed course and it has many disadvantages, its inaccessibility not being the least.

To me it seems odd that one of the world's wonders would be allowed to be sacrificed for commercial gain. The story would be different if this were a rare element unavailable anywhere else in the country, or something vital to national defense, but these conditions don't hold. Salt deposits are found in many places and the oceans that determine the east and west boundaries of our country are excellent sources. Because the salt resources of the area with which we are concerned will last only a short time longer, the potash company that is destroying the part of the flats usable for speed events will soon have to turn to other nearby areas that have large deposits but aren't suitable for speed events. In view of the limited time in the future during which it will be of any value to anyone, the state of Utah, or the Federal Government, should declare the area of the flats suitable for a high-speed course a State or Federal Park, as has been done with other, less spectacular areas, so this one-of-a-kind area can be preserved eternally. As a park or a preserve, speed events could still be held on the salt because these events have no ill effect on it. Winter rains heal any scars the events leave.

Another thing about the salt's being where it is that might not have been considered by those who could pass leg-

islation that would preserve it, is that in windy weather, and the wind blows fiercely across the flats quite frequently, it has a tremendous effect on the safety of the motorists traveling on the highway that crosses it. As the salt is quite cohesive, the wind doesn't pick it up and carry it. But when it is gone, the flats will become a dust bowl because it is doubtful whether any vegetation would ever grow on them, and the winds will become dust storms that could conceivably cause many accidents on the highway and possibly make the highway impassable for hours at a time. Fellows who run at El Mirage dry lake are familiar with such dust storms and know how dangerous they can make driving. A new four-lane highway to replace the present badly deteriorated two-lane road that crosses the flats is now in the planning stage. Building such a modern thoroughfare only to have it become impassable at certain times of the year would be extremely bad business. The condition could be similar to one that exists in Southern California in the Indio-Palm Springs area. The main highway in this area is often closed because of high winds that blow sand across it. Cars that get caught in the sand storms often require new paint jobs and windshields.

I have never seen an official report to this effect but some persons are saying that governmental agencies have considered legislation that would preserve the salt but discarded the idea for the reason that the potash plant is essential to the economy of Utah. This is ridiculous and apparently based on the assumption that the salt in the area used for speed events will last forever. It won't. And when it is gone, the plant will have to move its collecting operations to other nearby areas where salt is reasonably plentiful but not as accessible but which can be removed without ill effects to anyone.

Common sense dictates that the salt in the area now used for speed trials should be restored to its original condition by filling the canals and be preserved in this condition by making it a State or Federal park, to be used only for sightseeing as a natural wonder and for speed trials which bring worldwide recognition to both the state of Utah and the USA. If this isn't done, I'm afraid the state of Utah will soon regret the lack of foresight that allowed the salt to be removed. And until such legislation is passed, anyone who has been contemplating construction of a vehicle of any type for an attempt on the World's Land Speed Record had better save his money because chances are that by the time his vehicle is completed there won't be any place, at least in the United States, to run it.