



FUEL FOR THOUGHT

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HIGH SPEED RACING ENVIRONMENTALISTS

All the racers I hang out with are environmentalists. Land speed racers to be precise. Before you dismiss my brash statement as absurd, try to think of ANY other segment of motorsport where the competitors are obliged to protect their racing venue from destructive outside forces? Better yet, how many racing organizations have been formed primarily as a citizen watchdog group that relies on racing to get the job done?

The Utah Salt Flats Racing Association (USFRA) was formed in 1976 to preserve the Bonneville Salt Flats and promote the use of the historic motorsports location for future generations. Everybody knows about the SCTA/BNI and how they started speeding things up on the salt in 1949, but its damn difficult trying to keep an eye on things from southern California. The fine land speeders of Utah rose to the occasion when the salt desperately needed local stewardship.

Pause a moment and consider: racers banding together to save the public lands. Back then the government's position was "use it or lose it" and with only one race a year (SCTA's Speedweek August 16-22) the Feds couldn't justify maintaining a racecourse year-round. That's why we have the USFRA's World of Speed (September 19 - 23) and the SCTA/BNI's World Finals (October 15-18) today.

"Save The Salt," (STS) an organization populated by volunteers from both racing groups, was spawned to provide constant vigilance, racer diplomacy and legal muscle flexing to protect the great white dyno from extinction. STS asked for help from many environmental groups, but were rebuffed because no one gave two swats of a dung beetle's fine behind about a sodium chloride wasteland. No trees to hug either.

Mining companies have been caring since the late 1800's and the sodium wonderland has paid dearly for the attentions. Nature has also played a role in fiddling about with the integrity of the salt beds. Nevertheless, wherever man monkeys about in nature, nature usually gets screwed.

I ask you, who better than racers to guard the great speed lab from harm? Oh sure, it's federal land under the protection of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). However, helpful as this august agency has been over the years, the salt was simply shrinking. While administration was scratching its collective noggin about what to do, the USFRA got busy.

“Both racing organizations stay busy protecting the salt and keep in close contact with BLM reps to make sure they are informed about what is happening out on the salt since the racers spend so much time out there, preparing, repairing and running on the racecourse.” So said Gary Allen, the newest member of the 200MPH Club when he drove his red Monza to a D/Classic blown fuel altered record of 236 mph, but also president of the USFRA and its representative on the Save The Salt board. He kindly updated me on the latest developments that focus on the BLM renewal of Reilly Industries 20-year mining lease.

STS intends to convince the BLM it ought to make the continuation of the pumping program an integral part of the actual lease terms and not simply a toothless notation, as is currently the case. Save The Salt is not naïve enough to believe some happy little note will protect the salt for the next two decades and it is fully prepared to bring legal action to bear if the BLM balks.

According to Allen, there is both a State and District BLM office with the State BLM negotiating leases. Although the original pumping program only called for five years Reilly has continued pumping now entering the seventh year. The pumping program stumbled and burped a few times along the way but Allen figures that over the 6-year period, nearly 6.5 million tons have been put back on the raceway side making a significant improvement to the salt surface.

From the peanut gallery it makes sense to keep pumping. Here’s why: Reilly needs to keep low the amount of salt in its primary ponds on the south side of Interstate 80. To ensure a good, hard racing surface on the north side of I-80, the brine, or salt content pumped atop needs to be around 19 percent, what tech heads equate as 1.15 specific gravity. Weak brine melts the existing salt and can cause what little salt arrives to be blown away. Too strong a brine solution will work the pumps to death – wasting time and money in the process.

Back in 1993, when Allen and the USFRA were setting up the racecourse, they noticed some areas were weak and mushy while other parts were rock hard. Allen supplied samples of both the hard and soft stuff for analysis by a lab. It was revealed that high magnesium chloride levels translated into weak salt that turned granular and would not support the weight of a normal racecar.

“Worse, when heavier vehicles would go across the salt,” Allen noted, “It would leave behind ruts for a couple years -- some of which cut tight across the international course and that can spell disaster for high speed runs.” The way I see it if enough salt goes back to where it is needed then eventually the absolute world record might once more be contested on the Bonneville Salt Flats. Thank you Black Rock Desert. With speeds moving towards 500 mph, the idea of two-way runs is also archaic, although I’ll save that soap-box commentary for another time.

Save The Salt is ever vigilant, but what can a concerned person do? Allen has two words for you: “Stay informed.” If you want to keep tabs on the latest developments log onto the USFRA and SCTA/BNI web sites at: www.saltflats.com and www.scta-bni.org

“I’m not sure that throwing money at the problem is the answer,” replied Allen when I asked about donations, “Writing a letter to the BLM would go a long way to letting the government know that the fate of the salt flats means is the business of more than just the locals.” It means STS needs you to get involved, if only with a letter, to make the government realize how many folks actually care passionately about the salt’s future and racing heritage.

The Bonneville Salt Flats is the largest expanse of serene zilch a person might ever bond with. One visit can stay with you a lifetime. Others are drawn back annually; it’s mental magnetism on overdrive. The place could make Darwin meditate, but I prefer to muse that God is a land speed racer. Once you’ve had the supreme pleasure of rolling with conviction over the saline pristine – never mind setting a speed record – a spark of divinity is exposed and I don’t mean inside a cylinder.

Bonneville is worth protecting if you are speed hungry and there’s no substitute for visiting the Utah’s sodium pancake to satisfy the starving. It is something you must do by and for yourself. Once smitten you’ll understand why so many are compelled to protect it, defend it and keep it safe if for no other reason than to permit future generations to be as knocked out about the place as I am . . . , and get suited up and go real fast.