

July 13, 2023

The Honorable Governor Gavin Newsom  
1021 O Street, Suite 9000  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Subject: Environmental Justice Request for State and Federal Emergency Declaration for the Tijuana River Transboundary Pollution Crisis Impact on Youth and Local Organizations

Dear Honorable Governor Newsom:

As nonprofit and community based organizations representing coastal residents, workers, activists, and recreators in San Diego County, and advocates for and with children, youth, and their families, we are writing to strongly urge the State of California to fulfill their commitments to support Environmental Justice communities and take decisive action to address the severe transboundary pollution crisis in the Tijuana River Valley and the Pacific Ocean shoreline from the U.S. Mexico border through Coronado.

We believe all residents, especially children and youth, should have repeated, meaningful, safe access to the outdoors to help improve physical and mental health outcomes, promote self-confidence in new experiences, and foster a love and understanding for the environment. Lack of access to safe outdoors spaces, especially for historically underserved communities, is a reason for the critical mission-driven work that we do.

Summer is a time of year when many of our organizations facilitate opportunities for safe recreation and critical skill development in the ocean for thousands of children and youth. Beach closures and advisories resulting from transboundary pollution in South County beaches now hinders many programs, putting new cumbersome considerations into operations including expense and risk of transportation. For many programs this is a burden that organizational resources can not overcome. The consequence is that many young people, especially those in South Bay communities, are missing out on critical experiences.

The Imperial Beach shoreline located in South San Diego County is tragically recognized as the most polluted stretch of sandy beach in the entire country. With over 550 consecutive days of beach closures due to the ongoing influx of sewage, industrial discharges, and trash from the Tijuana River, the community of Imperial Beach is bearing the brunt of this environmental disaster. Pollution in the Tijuana River remains the most urgent environmental justice issue in San Diego County.

We are formally requesting a State and Federal Emergency Declaration for the Tijuana River Valley and the shoreline of Imperial Beach. The continuous influx of transboundary pollution is wreaking havoc on the local community, economy, and environment along the coastline of South San Diego County. Since October 2018, the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission has documented the entry of over 100 billion gallons of toxic effluent into the United States through the Tijuana River, with an additional 35 billion gallons crossing the international border since December 28, alone.<sup>1</sup>

The extent of this pollution has been studied for decades including recent research from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography with funding from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that attributes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://waterdata.ibwc.gov/Data/Dashboard/8>

34,000 illnesses in calendar year 2017 to water quality pollution along the Imperial Beach coastline.<sup>2</sup> The high levels of coastal water pollution are even impacting local air quality.<sup>3</sup> Researchers are monitoring the airborne transmission pathways for coastal water pollution and documenting concerning levels of industrial chemicals and pathogens from aerosol sea spray generated from wind and ocean waves.<sup>4</sup> These potential public health concerns are why the Cities of Imperial Beach and San Diego maintain an ongoing State of Local Emergency related to the impacts of cross-border pollution in the Tijuana River. In addition, the County of San Diego has now declared a State of Local Emergency for the Tijuana River Valley.

The coastal communities of South San Diego County face an immense challenge from the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River that is beyond local control. It is a public health emergency that requires a State and Federal Emergency Declaration to coordinate and prioritize a multi-agency response to this ongoing disaster. The continuous flow of untreated sewage and other pollutants into our waters is unacceptable and must be addressed immediately.

Over the past decade, local community-based organizations, including the undersigned, have participated in and contributed to developing comprehensive solutions for the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. Our collaborative efforts have resulted in an initial allocation of \$300 million through the United States, Mexico, and Canada Agreement (USMCA) to identify and implement a comprehensive approach to solve the longstanding pollution problem in the Tijuana River. The EPA has already prepared a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement and identified the preferred list of projects that are necessary to ultimately control the discharge of wastewater, trash, and sedimentation into the Tijuana River Valley. Unfortunately, more funding and state and federal agency coordination is needed to move these projects forward.

An entire generation of children is growing up in South San Diego County, having only experienced polluted beaches. While we appreciate the EPA's identification of a comprehensive solution, the reality remains that these projects are still years away from implementation, with no sense of urgency from federal officials to address funding shortfalls. We implore a State and Federal Emergency Declaration to expedite funding and implementation of projects across multiple state and federal agencies. The pollution disaster in the Tijuana River warrants the same level of state and federal agency coordination and response as other national crises such as the Ohio toxic train derailment, Flint water crisis, the 2021 Orange County oil spill, devastating hurricanes, and destructive atmospheric river storms. These examples highlight the urgent need for immediate action and the importance of a coordinated response to protect the health and well-being of our communities.

Just as state and federal agencies and resources are mobilized to respond to natural disasters like hurricanes, a State and Federal Emergency Declaration for the Tijuana River would enable the coordination and allocation of critical resources to address this ongoing environmental catastrophe. The same level of urgency, funding, and comprehensive action that is applied to other national emergencies,

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<sup>2</sup> Falk Feddersen et al. "Modeling Untreated Wastewater Evolution and Swimmer Illness for Four Wastewater Infrastructure Scenarios in the San Diego-Tijuana (US/MX) Border Region" October 28, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2021GH000490>

<sup>3</sup> Matthew A. Pendergraft et al. "Airborne Transmission Pathway for Coastal Water Pollution" PeerJ; 2021. <https://peerj.com/articles/11358/4>

<sup>4</sup> Matthew A. Pendergraft et al. "Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol" Environmental Science & Technology; 2023. <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.2c02312?ref=pdf>

whether natural or man-made, must be extended to the pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. Our communities cannot afford to wait for years for these projects to be implemented while the health and well-being of our residents and the environment continue to suffer.

Community agencies are committed to stopping the border pollution and its extreme impacts on coastal water quality, coastal recreation, unique wetland habitat and the nearby communities that are forced to deal with the public health hazard this pollution creates. Extreme pollution in the Tijuana River Watershed is so toxic that many volunteers used to wear protective gear to conduct cleanups and now volunteerism in these areas has ceased because of frequent illness. Many local organizations have had to adapt or cancel programs in response to the health hazards caused by the pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. Additionally, local lifeguards as well as U.S. Border Patrol and Navy conduct patrols and training in contaminated environments that put staff, agents, and sailors at risk.

We urgently appeal to the State of California to fulfill their commitments to support Environmental Justice communities and take decisive action to address the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River.

Respectfully,

4 Walls International  
A Reason To Survive (ARTS)  
Blue Dot Education  
CA Mountain Biking Coalition  
Clean Earth 4 Kids  
Climate Action Campaign  
Coastal Roots Farm  
Earth Discovery Institute  
Emerald Keepers  
Environmental Center of San Diego  
Friends of Friendship Park  
Groundwork San Diego-Chollas Creek  
Hispanic Access Foundation  
Latino Outdoors San Diego  
Ocean Discovery Institute  
Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center  
Outdoor Outreach  
Paddle for Peace  
Project Kolika  
Rescue Agency

San Diego Audubon Society  
San Diego Coastkeeper  
San Diego for Every Child  
San Diego Green Infrastructure Consortium  
San Diego Mountain Biking Association  
San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce  
San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy  
SanDiego350  
Sierra Service Project  
Sprockids San Diego  
Stop the Sewage  
Surfrider Foundation  
The Escondido Creek Conservancy  
The Trauma Foundation  
Un Mar De Colores  
Urban Surf 4 Kids  
Wall Ace Inc  
WILD Coast  
YMCA of San Diego County  
Youth Will

CC: San Diego Region State Legislators

Deputy Legislative Secretary, Office of the Governor  
Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Office of the Governor  
Secretary, California Environmental Protection Agency  
Director, Department of Toxic Substances Control



Earth Discovery Institute

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San Diego Mountain Biking Association



Groundwork SAN DIEGO  
Chollas Creek



youth will

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