



City of Imperial Beach, California

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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August 02, 2023

Governor Gavin Newsom
Office of the Governor
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

Subject: Request for State of Emergency for the Tijuana River Sewage Emergency

Dear Governor Newsom:

As the Mayor of Imperial Beach, I write to you with deep concern regarding the severe pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. It is with a sense of urgency that I call upon State of California to take a larger role in securing funding, resources, and political will by declaring a State of Emergency for the pollution crisis in the Tijuana River.

The continuous influx of transboundary pollution is wreaking havoc on the local community, economy, and environment along the coastline of South San Diego County, and impacting California's State Beaches. Border Field State Park shoreline has been closed 602 consecutive days. Silver Strand State Beach was closed 199 consecutive days and remains under warning as of today. Since October 2018, the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission has documented over 100 billion gallons of toxic effluent into California through the Tijuana River, with an additional 35 billion gallons crossing the international border since December 28, alone.¹ This ongoing inundation of sewage creates the most polluted stretch of sandy beach in the entire country. The community of Imperial Beach is bearing the brunt of this environmental disaster with over 600 consecutive days of beach closures due to the ongoing influx of sewage, industrial discharges, and trash from the Tijuana River². Pollution in the Tijuana River remains the most urgent environmental justice issue in San Diego County.

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 34,000 illnesses in calendar year 2017 to water quality pollution along the Imperial Beach coastline³. The high levels of coastal water pollution are even impacting local air quality⁴. Researchers are monitoring the airborne transmission pathways for coastal water pollution and

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

² <http://www.sdbeachinfo.com/>

³ 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>

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

documenting concerning levels of industrial chemicals and pathogens from aerosol sea spray generated from wind and ocean waves⁵. 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, County of San Diego has declared a Public Health Crisis 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 agencies have forged a strong partnership with federal agencies to develop Comprehensive Solutions for the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River⁶. 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 federal agency coordination is needed to move these projects forward. This declaration will open the doors to much-needed state and federal assistance, allowing us to tackle the pressing issues identified in the Comprehensive Solution proposed by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

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 State or Federal officials to address funding shortfalls or resolve critical agency coordination issues. We demand a State and Federal Emergency Declaration to expedite funding and implementation of projects across multiple agencies. The pollution disaster in the Tijuana River warrants the same level of federal agency coordination and response as other national crises such as wildfires, the 2021 Orange County oil spill, earthquakes, 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. The same level of urgency, funding, and comprehensive action that is applied to other national emergencies, whether natural or man-made, must be extended to the pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. Our communities cannot afford to wait for year for these projects to be implemented while the health and well-being of our residents and the environment continue to suffer.

The pollution from the Tijuana River represents the most pressing environmental injustice in our state, demanding immediate attention and resolution. We call for a State of Emergency Declaration, as this is a public health emergency that requires coordinated efforts and resources that is beyond local control. The collaborative work between local, state, and federal agencies has laid the foundation for comprehensive solutions, but additional funding, agency coordination, and political will are necessary to move forward.

⁵ 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>

⁶ <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/usmca-tijuana-river-watershed>

Our children deserve clean beaches and clean water now, not years from now. We implore the Governor's office to prioritize the health and well-being of our communities and take swift action to resolve this dire situation.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paloma Aguirre', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Paloma Aguirre
Mayor
City of Imperial Beach

CC:

California Senator Steve Padilla
California Assemblymember David Alvarez
California Natural Resources Agency Secretary Wade Crowfoot
CALEPA Secretary Yana Garcia
California Coastal Commission Chair Donne Brownsey
California Coastal Commission Executive Director Kate Huckelbridge
Baja California Governor Marina del Pilar