

California Coastal Commission

Tijuana River Pollution Press Clippings

October 2023 back through February 2023

Table of Contents

Biden requesting \$310 to fix, expand wastewater treatment plant fouling San Diego’s South County	0
Tijuana River Valley cleanup gets \$5 million boost from the county	2
Newsom says Tijuana sewage crisis is a federal issue. Coastal Commission will look to Biden for a declaration.....	5
What would happen if Tijuana sewage crisis is declared an emergency?	9
No reprieve in sight for sewage flow from Mexico as repair costs continue to climb.....	16
Amid new spills and stink, U.S. senators request millions more to fix Tijuana sewage crisis	20
Tropical Storm Hilary made South Bay sewage woes worst.....	24
Newsom to Biden and Congress: Make federal funds available to fix Tijuana sewage crisis.....	26
County supervisors push for federal emergency on Tijuana River pollution	29
What’s been lost with South County beach closures? A way of life	31
Supervisors OK emergency declaration on cross-border pollution	36
Environment Report: Congressional Reps ‘Shocked’ by Broken Border Plant.....	39
The US Plant Treating Tijuana’s Sewage is Busted	42
Coronado beaches closed from Tijuana sewage ahead of Memorial Day weekend	46
Promises, Promises: Tijuana sewage crisis sickens tens of thousands	52
Tijuana sewage isn’t only in Imperial Beach waves. It’s in the air. And San Diegans are breathing it.	64
Tijuana sewage pours through San Diego border canyons after recent pipe break	67
Tijuana sewage blasted San Diego’s South Bay beaches at record place in 2022. What will this summer bring?	70

October 2023

[Biden seeks \\$310M to fix plant fouling San Diego beaches - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com)

Biden requesting \$310 to fix, expand wastewater treatment plant fouling San Diego's South County



The International Wastewater Treatment Plant in the Tijuana River Valley. (Alejandro Tamayo/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The money is part of a \$56 billion emergency supplemental funding request that faces an uncertain fate in Congress.

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER OCT. 25, 2023 5:59 PM PT

President Joe Biden is asking that lawmakers grant \$310 million in emergency spending to fix the sewage pollution from Mexico that is wreaking havoc on South County communities.

The administration on Wednesday sent to Congress a supplemental funding request of \$55.8 billion for natural disasters, child care and other expenses, which includes a petition “to prevent and reduce sewage flows and contamination in Southern California through support for ongoing design and construction at the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant.”

Over the last five years, more than 100 billion gallons of toxic waste have flowed over the border from Tijuana and up the coast as far north as Coronado, according to the U.S. International Boundary and

Water Commission, which operates the facility. Part of the problem is that the San Ysidro-based plant is partly broken and in dire need of repairs and expansion.

Biden's request comes after pleas in August from California Sen. Alex Padilla and the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein to Senate leadership, as well as a companion appeal led by Rep. Scott Peters to House members in September.

"San Diegans have called on the federal government to put an end to this crisis for years," Peters said in a statement Wednesday. "Today, thanks to their overwhelming advocacy and dedicated work from elected officials at every level of government, the President has responded to our pleas for help."

The funding will require approval from both chambers of Congress, however, which Peters said "remains an uphill battle." He added that he is "working to ensure we have the voters to get it across the finish line."

If approved, the \$310 million would supplement the \$300 million that Congress secured in 2021 to cover the expansion of the South Bay treatment plant so that it can double the amount of raw sewage it treats, from 25 million gallons per day to 50 million gallons per day.

The expansion project has been part of a \$630 million plan the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency hoped to break ground on this year. However, it was revealed in June that the plant is in such a state of disrepair that it would cost at least \$150 million to fix it before it could be expanded by the U.S.

International Boundary and Water Commission, which operates the facility. -

Recent storms only exacerbated the plant's vulnerabilities. In August, when Tropical Storm Hilary struck San Diego, wastewater flows had at one point reached 80 million gallons per day. Resulting damage to portions of the plant is costing the IBWC around \$8 million. Some repairs have since begun and the amount of polluted water that flows from Tijuana is expected to reduce gradually, according to the IBWC.

The agency told the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board last month that the cost to repair and expand the plan has now climbed to \$900 million.

Peters, along with other San Diego County congressional members and the California Coastal Commission, are now demanding a full account of how the wastewater treatment plant was allowed to deteriorate.

Local officials said they are grateful that Biden is including the crisis in his supplemental ask.

“This is a critical step toward the desperately needed fixes to help stop the sewage flow impacting Imperial Beach & San Diego,” Imperial Beach Mayor and state Coastal Commissioner Paloma Aguirre said on social media.

Gov. Gavin Newsom, who had urged Biden to make federal funds available to fix the treatment plant, said in a statement that read, in part, “It’s critical that Congress act quickly to approve the President’s proposal and address this crisis.”

Earlier this month, she successfully directed that the commission draft a letter calling on Biden to declare the cross-border pollution an emergency. The board will vote on sending it next month.

[Tijuana River Valley cleanup gets \\$5M boost from county - The San Diego Union-Tribune](#)

Tijuana River Valley cleanup gets \$5 million boost from the county



Flood waters carry sewage and sediment from Smuggler’s Gulch onto Monument Road, pictured, after winter storms. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Flows through drainage channels release sewage, trash and other pollutants into the Tijuana River and flood nearby communities after major rains

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER OCT. 24, 2023 7:34 PM PT

San Diego County will spend \$5 million to expand removal of sewage and trash from Mexico that accumulates in the Tijuana River Valley.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a plan that involves building a sediment- and trash-control basin and dredging the drainage channels, known as Smuggler's Gulch and Pilot Channel, that often build up with debris after storms.

Flows through the concrete channels repeatedly release sewage, trash and other pollutants into the Tijuana River and flood nearby communities after major rains. South County beaches are frequently closed as a result of winter storms that wash polluted flows through the river watershed.

Dredging is the removal of sediments and debris from the bottom of water bodies and is routinely needed because sedimentation gradually fills channels, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The project is funded by \$750,000 in county funds and a \$4.25 million grant from the California Water Resources Control Board. Earlier this year, the state board had approved \$34 million for six projects designed to improve water quality in the Tijuana River Valley and New River.

Over the years, several local, state and federal agencies have worked to develop plans to address cross-border pollution, and removing debris from the river and channels has been among those efforts.

The county and city of San Diego are responsible for removing accumulated sediment in portions of the channels because both own land where the gulch is located.

Smuggler's Gulch, which enters the U.S. from Mexico, runs north until it connects with the Pilot Channel and ultimately flows into the river. The Pilot Channel flows toward the Pacific Ocean via a southern channel of the river. In 1993, the city built the Pilot Channel to address flooding in the area due to winter

storms.

The county's project will cover dredging work in both Smuggler's Gulch and the Pilot Channel. A staff report said the county is working with the city on the approach, "with the understanding that the proposed dredging activities are short-term in nature and do not indicate the County's willingness or intent to take on maintenance of City-owned property within Smuggler's Gulch or any portion of the Pilot Channel."

Supervisor Jim Desmond said that while the county will be taking on the work at the channels, which span more than 9,000 feet in length, "I don't want to be locked into us now taking care of the entire portion" of the waterways.

County officials said the project is a step in the right direction and one of many needed to end the sewage crisis that has affected Tijuana and South Bay communities for years.

Tijuana's wastewater system has had numerous pipeline breaks and other challenges that have been exacerbated by winter storms in recent years. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has laid out a [\\$630 million plan](#) to improve conditions that focuses largely on installing a pumping station in the river. Plans are also underway to replace a broken wastewater treatment plant in Mexico and upgrade one based in San Ysidro.

"This is really, I think, demonstration to the community that we're not going to stop and we're gonna continue to fight so they can have a livable community and that they can actually breathe in their community," said Chairperson Nora Vargas.

[Newsom says Tijuana sewage crisis is a federal issue. Coastal Commission will look to Biden for a declaration - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](#)

Newsom says Tijuana sewage crisis is a federal issue. Coastal Commission will look to Biden for a declaration



The state Coastal Commission did a site visit to the Tijuana River Valley on Wednesday. (Ana Ramirez / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Overseers of state's coastline took tour of Tijuana area and testimony from local residents and officials

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER OCT. 11, 2023 8:11 PM PT

Gov. Gavin Newsom says the sewage crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border does not qualify as an emergency under state statute and that is why he has not issued a declaration. So members of the California Coastal Commission, following a visit Wednesday to the South Bay area affected by the ongoing toxic pollution, agreed to consider asking President Joe Biden to proclaim one.

For months, local, county and state officials have called on Newsom to use his emergency powers to waive state regulations that would expedite solutions to fix the deteriorating wastewater treatment plant in San Diego that is allowing Tijuana sewage to foul San Diego County beaches. The Governor's Office had not publicly explained why he would not issue the order until Tuesday.

In a letter to Coastal Commission Executive Director Kate Huckelbridge, David Sapp, Newsom's legal affairs secretary, explained that it was a jurisdictional issue and he said that "a state proclamation of emergency cannot accelerate federal work needed on this federal facility that is in a federally controlled area on an international border."

Thus, such a proclamation is not necessary "to trigger a federal declaration," which the president can do under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, Sapp added.

Imperial Beach Mayor and Commissioner Paloma Aguirre, who has spearheaded calls for an emergency declaration, proposed the commission turn to the president for said proclamation as well as solicit help from other agencies. She suggested the state Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention get involved by conducting a comprehensive public health assessment because "we are on the brink of collapse."

Commissioners agreed that at its next meeting it would consider sending Biden a letter requesting he issue an emergency declaration, and a letter to Newsom urging him to do the same. In August, Newsom asked that Biden immediately free up \$300 million in previously allocated funding to repair the San Ysidro-based wastewater treatment plant but he stopped short of asking him to declare an emergency.

Chairperson Donnie Brownsey said the commission should also ask that the federal government fully fund the expansion of the outdated wastewater plant, a project, that with repairs included, would cost nearly \$1 billion.



Members of the Coastal Commission visited the Tijuana River Valley on Wednesday. The tour included a stop at the exterior of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant and a drive-through and stop within the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve. (Ana Ramirez / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The move came after a unique, three-hour visit to the Tijuana River Valley where commissioners, alongside residents and environmental advocates, got a closer look at the pollution and sewage stench. Their tour preceded a five-hour meeting full of impassioned testimonies from impacted residents and lifeguards and local doctors who said data they are collecting shows that South County residents are increasingly becoming ill because of the sewage on their beaches and in the air they breathe.

Kimberly and Matthew Dickson, doctors who own and practice at South Bay Urgent Care on Palm Avenue in Imperial Beach, said they are seeing an increase in gastrointestinal illnesses. After tropical storm Hilary in August, when more than 2 billion gallons of wastewater flowed over the border, the urgent care center saw an average of 35 people per week suffering from diarrhea.

“Normally, we’d see five a week,” said Matthew Dixon. “This is a direct correlation of people getting sick.”

The commission also heard from Maria-Elena Giner, a commissioner with the International Boundary and

Water Commission, which operates the San Diego wastewater treatment plant. She reminded commissioners that some repairs will take up to a year but that the amount of wastewater flowing from Tijuana will start to reduce gradually. Giner underscored the challenges of expediting construction work with only a \$50 million budget the agency has available to cover all of its construction projects along the U.S.-Mexico border. Thus, funding is the biggest challenge.

Lt. Gov. Eleni Kounalakis, who attended the meeting, said she first witnessed the severity of the sewage crisis in 2019 and found it “mind-boggling” that circumstances have only worsened. She demanded that Giner return before commissioners next month with answers to questions she posed, including an explanation for the poor condition of the wastewater plant and the agency’s budget for maintaining the plant.

Similarly, Rep. Scott Peters, D-San Diego, and other San Diego County congressional members sent a letter to the Department of State demanding a full accounting of how the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant fell into a state of disrepair.

The Commission will reconvene next month.

September 2023

[What would happen if Tijuana sewage crisis is declared an emergency? - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com)

What would happen if Tijuana sewage crisis is declared an emergency?



The International Wastewater Treatment Plant in the Tijuana River Valley. (Alejandro Tamayo/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Neither the governor nor the president have answered local calls for a formal declaration, but it might not be the right tool to solve the issue

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER SEPT. 17, 2023 4 PM PT

Saying this is “a pivotal moment that calls for resolute action,” all 18 mayors in San Diego County sent a letter last week to Gov. Gavin Newsom imploring him to declare a state of emergency over the decades-long sewage crisis at the border.

It is the latest in a string of pleas from local, county, state and congressional leaders demanding an immediate and forceful response from the governor and President Joe Biden to the constant contamination from the Tijuana River Valley that has closed beaches, imperiled residents’ health and jeopardized the South Bay economy.

“The magnitude of this crisis, with its far-reaching consequences, demands the full mobilization of every

resource and enforcement authority at the state's disposal," the mayors say in their letter.

But what exactly would a state of emergency do? And does the sewage crisis meet the criteria?

At the local level, 'We can only do so much'

Thirty years ago, in September 1993, San Diego was the first city to declare a local emergency because of the cross-border pollution and that declaration has remained active ever since.

It took three decades for the county of San Diego to follow suit. In June, the Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to issue a declaration and last week they continued it for at least another 60 days. Imperial Beach has had an emergency declaration in place for four years.

Under the county's declaration, staff were directed to report back by next month with documented economic damages from cross-border pollution. Initial estimates for the county and affected cities exceed \$20 million (disposing of garbage, placing beach closure signs, enforcement and water testing) since 2010 and are expected to climb, Nora Vargas, chair of the Board of Supervisors, told the state Office of Emergency Services last month.

She had requested via a letter that money be made available through California's Disaster Assistance Act for costs incurred and that the state provide access to federal resources to help local governments and impacted businesses.

Newsom's response was an Aug. 9 letter to Biden asking him to free up \$300 million in previously allocated funding to upgrade the failing federal wastewater plant in San Ysidro that treats sewage from Tijuana. On Sept. 1, the Governor's Office announced that the federal government would put those funds to work. But he stopped short of declaring a state emergency or asking the president to declare a federal emergency.

The local declarations are largely symbolic, calling attention to the issue and pressing the governor and president to fast-track significantly more spending to fix the problem.

"We can only do so much at the local level," said Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre. "A state declaration would be, at minimum, for solidarity and, at best, to actually help us get the immediate relief that we need, not just calling for money that was already secured."

When a state of emergency is declared, a lot of red tape is cut. For example, it could accelerate and

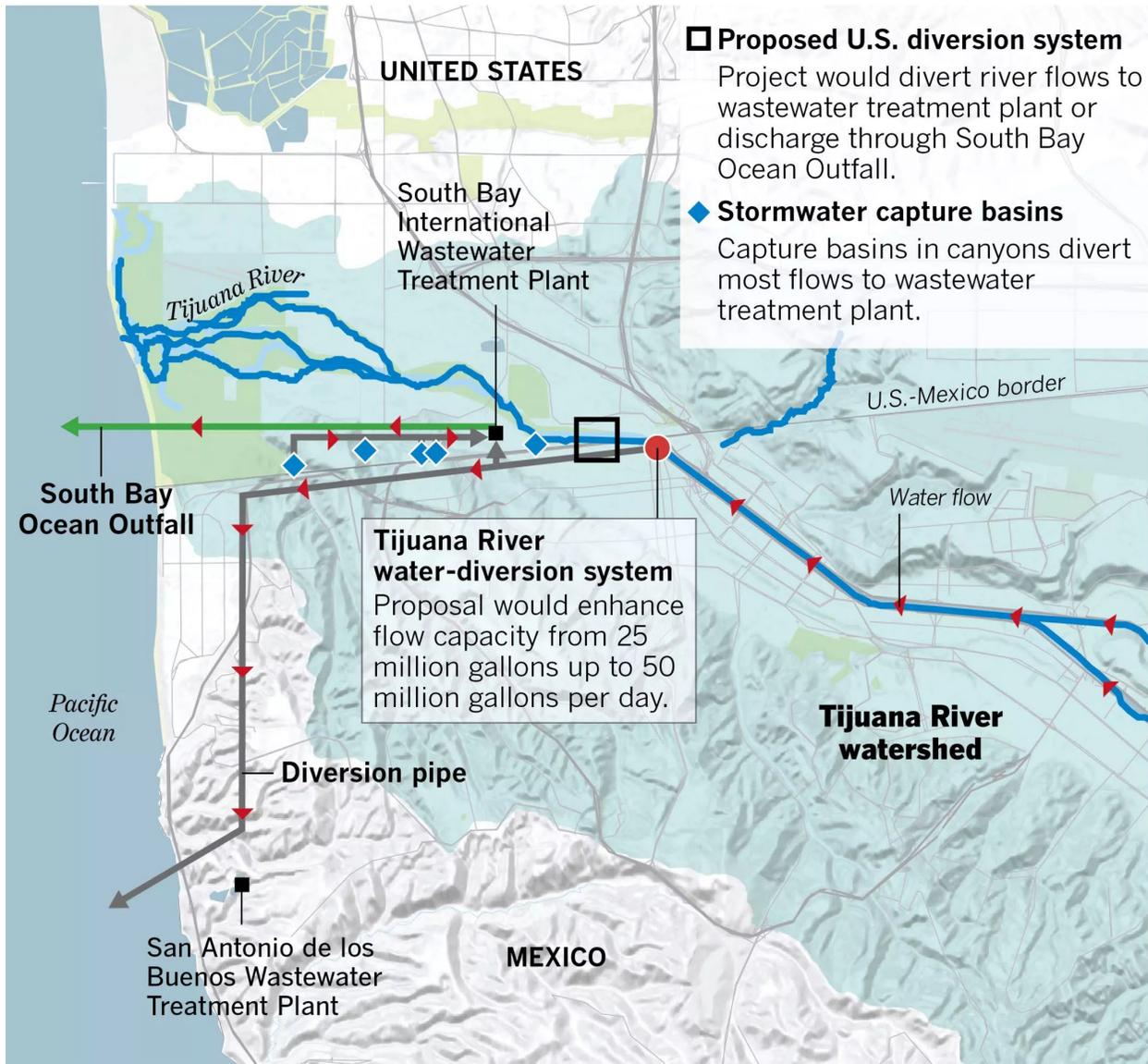
simplify the bidding process for construction contracts and free up federal money for personnel, equipment and supplies.

That process played out in March. Newsom requested presidential emergency and major disaster declarations to bolster the state's response to severe storms. Biden immediately approved them, making available grants for temporary housing and home repairs and money on a cost-sharing basis to fix damaged infrastructure.

The U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission, which operates the deteriorating San Ysidro-based wastewater treatment plant, said last week it will solicit bids to hire design and construction firms later this fall. It has declined to provide a clear timeline to execute the full project, which is now expected to cost about \$900 million.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's plan for fixing the sewage crisis

The three strategies proposed to reduce sewage contamination are replacing the broken San Antonio de los Buenos Treatment Plant in Mexico, repairing and expanding the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant in San Ysidro, and building a new Tijuana River diversion system.



Sources: IBWC; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; International Boundary and Water Commission; Nextzen; OpenStreetMap

CRISTINA BYVIK & MICHELLE GUERRERO U-T

Proving it's beyond the state's capability

The federal government does not automatically offer help when disaster strikes. There is a process to follow, and it starts with a request to the president from the governor.

A request is made after state and local governments have exhausted their resources, according to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.

They need to prove what was done to alleviate an emergency, as well as what kind of and how much federal assistance is needed.

Environmental attorneys and public policy researchers say cross-border pollution doesn't fit the definition of an emergency or major disaster under the Stafford Act. Funding is intended to support incidents that are sudden or unexpected, such as natural disasters, accidental oil spills or, most recently, contagious diseases like COVID-19, not ongoing situations for which the needs are long-term or broader in scope. In many cases, emergency work is only allowed for 10 days and aid often includes debris removal, medicine and food, emergency shelter, housing assistance and crisis counseling.

Reports of Tijuana sewage spewing into the South County region go back at least to the 1930s. And though significant improvements were made in the 1990s, the city's plumbing hasn't kept pace with population growth.

The lack of state resources being made available to address the crisis could hurt efforts for a declaration. A robust analysis of the economic and health impacts could bolster their cause, said Andre Monette, a Washington, D.C., attorney with Best Best and Krieger, LLP who works with public and private clients on water quality issues.

Aguirre agrees. She would like the state to dedicate staff to the issue, measure aerosol pollution, provide hazard pay to the city lifeguards who perform rescues in sewage-blasted waters, or additional recreational opportunities for residents who just experienced their second summer with beach closures.

Newsom last year vetoed a bill that would have added \$50 million for the sewage crisis. He said previous state budgets had already allocated \$35 million, but had yet to be expended. Plus, he added, "With our state facing lower-than-expected revenues over the first few months of this fiscal year, it is important to remain disciplined."

There have also been calls for Biden to declare the situation an emergency.

Federal declarations without requests

The president can declare an emergency without the governor's request if the emergency involves federal

primary responsibility, according to the Congressional Research Service, which researches and educates congressional staff and legislators on public policy issues.

Most recently, former President Donald Trump issued a nationwide emergency declaration for the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also declarations where federal property was involved: the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing at a federal courthouse and when NASA's space shuttle Columbia disintegrated as it returned to Earth in 2003.

Built in 1997, the South Bay treatment plant is owned and operated by the U.S. portion of the International Boundary and Water Commission.

Governors' requests for emergency and major disaster declarations have been declined in the past for not meeting the definitions under the Stafford Act or because they have lacked severity.

In 2016, former Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder requested a major disaster declaration to deal with the lead-contaminated water crisis in Flint. Former President Barack Obama denied it on the basis that it was not deemed a major disaster under the Stafford Act, though he did approve a federal emergency declaration. Local leaders say Flint and the emergency declared for a bridge that collapsed in Pennsylvania in June serve as precedents for the Tijuana sewage crisis.

San Diego's legislative and congressional delegations have tried to find ways a federal declaration would apply.

MaryAnne Pinar, Rep. Scott Peters' chief of staff, said his office felt it was important to pursue one "because there are frequently more 'acute' events that arise due to pipe breaks and severe weather, as we just saw with (Tropical Storm) Hilary – the plant got so overwhelmed it spilled untreated sewage into the streets which is a serious public health risk."

Emergency declarations also help expedite procurement and construction processes, which local leaders say is needed to start fixing the problem more quickly.

Peters' office argued that federal government code does allow for noncompetitive procedures to maintain a facility and when the need for services "is such an unusual and compelling urgency that the federal government would be seriously injured."

"Theoretically, we feel this could be the case if the Federal Government cannot comply with the Clean Water Act," said Pinar. "Ultimately, this is about how the language is interpreted."

At the end of the day, cross-border pollution is an emergency that requires federal action now, said Coronado Mayor Richard Bailey, adding, “I know the Governor’s Office does take this seriously because I’ve been working with the office to round up support for more funding as well as additional oversight of the IBWC.”

Last week, the IBWC made it clear that significantly more funding is needed to repair and expand the entire wastewater system, while Mexico works to replace a defunct treatment plant that discharges 35 million gallons a day of raw sewage into the Pacific Ocean.

Elected officials are pushing for more funding.

The latest efforts: California senators’ plea to Congress for \$310 million in new emergency spending and a request from Peters to boost annual construction funding for the treatment plant to \$100 million via appropriations bills.

[Cross - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](http://sandiegouniontribune.com)

No reprieve in sight for sewage flow from Mexico as repair costs continue to climb



San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board members Eric Anderson, Chair Celeste Cantú, Vice Chair Betty Olson, Gary Strawn and Megan Blair listen during a board meeting in Mission Valley on Wednesday. (Kristian Carreon/For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Binational agency says it will be up to a year before steps can be taken to stop pollution

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER SEPT. 13, 2023 8:15 PM PT

Sewage from Tijuana will continue to foul South County beaches unchecked for at least a year before repairs can be made to an aging federal wastewater treatment plant at the U.S.-Mexico border, officials with the binational agency that operates the facility said Wednesday.

And the cost to complete full repairs and expand the entire system has ballooned from \$600 million to \$900 million, the International Boundary and Water Commission told members of the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board.

A representative with the International Boundary and Water Commission, or IBWC, said it has an “aggressive program” to come into compliance with its National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit, which regulates discharges to the waters of the country and is authorized by the Clean Water Act.



The South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant in San Ysidro. (Howard Lipin/U-T San Diego)

Maria-Elena Giner, an IBWC commissioner, told the water board that the plan for the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, based in San Ysidro, involves:

- Replacing a junction box that has two valves that broke in 2019 and 2020. Without working valves, the plant cannot regulate wastewater flow from Tijuana and must accept everything that enters through the junction box;
- Cleaning sedimentation tanks and all its mechanical parts; and
- Replacing two influent pumps where wastewater enters the treatment plant.

Since October 2020, the IBWC has reported about 360 violations of its NPDES permit, most for exceeding the limit of 25 million gallons per day of flow from Mexico that should enter the plant. The water board, which said it learned of violations as reported by the IBWC during routine monitoring reports, issued a notice of violation in February 2021. In May 2021, it ordered IBWC to complete some repairs, including those Giner announced Wednesday, immediately and others through February of this year. Most of those conditions were met. The water board said Wednesday it will take additional

enforcement actions in the coming months. It did not specify what those options were. The plant in San Ysidro provides a backstop for Tijuana by routinely taking more wastewater than it can handle. It discharges treated water through the South Bay Ocean Outfall, which stretches more than 3 miles off the coast of Imperial Beach.

Giner said the repairs to the South Bay plant are expected to cost about \$10 million, which the agency has already budgeted, and be completed sometime within the next nine to 12 months. In November, Mexico is expected to replace a wastewater line at its San Antonio de los Buenos treatment plant, which discharges about 35 million gallons a day of raw sewage into the Pacific Ocean, and that will also help reduce excess flows to the San Diego plant, she added.

This fall, Giner said the IBWC will also solicit bids to hire design and construction firms for the expansion of the plant to eventually double its capacity to 50 million gallons per day. Officials declined to specify when and how they planned to cover costs, citing procurement restrictions.

But with only a \$50 million budget to cover all the agency's construction projects, funding is its biggest challenge.

Elected leaders and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had secured \$300 million for a wide-ranging [\\$630 million plan](#) to expand the plant. However, the unspent funds will fall short because of deferred maintenance, which officials estimated to cost about \$150 million.

The cost to repair and expand the plant has now ballooned to \$900 million because of previous underestimates and changes in the costs of materials, said Giner. She underscored the need for additional funding, which San Diego's congressional and legislative delegation is pushing for via supplemental appropriation bills.

Water Board members agreed.

"I ask everybody in this room, anybody who has a relationship with congressional or senate staff or the individuals themselves, it's the money that we need," said water board Chairperson Celeste Cantú.

"Obviously, the commitment is there. The expertise is there, the money is not there."

She also called Giner's announcements a "glimmer of hope on the horizon" toward fixing cross-border pollution, a sentiment that was not shared by several people who spoke during public comment.

Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre and others representing environmental groups demanded the water board practice its full range of regulatory authority over IBWC and take a larger role in securing resources to address the sewage crisis.

“The baseline expectations for progress here and for IBWC’s role is a bit unnerving to watch,” said Laura Walsh, policy manager of the nonprofit Surfrider Foundation. “It sounds like it’ll be about a year until the IBWC just catches these systems up to where they were supposed to be 10 years ago.”

Aguirre said there must be greater preparation for future rainstorms, which gravely affect transboundary flows.

Last month, Tropical storm Hilary exacerbated the plant’s vulnerabilities. On Aug. 20, flows exceeded the capacity of the plant by 100 percent for six hours, or 50 million gallons per day, and reached 80 million gallons per day on Monday Aug 21. Damages, including pump and electrical issues, will cost the agency about \$8 million. IBWC plans to start repairs within 30 days.

Meanwhile, South County residents continue to voice concerns ongoing beach closures, headaches, nausea and losing sleep because the foul smell of sewage wakes them in the middle of the night.

“It’s the worst it’s ever been,” said Aguirre, adding that she will continue calls for the state and federal governments to declare the sewage issue an emergency and “suspend statute and prevent delay caused by the bidding and procurement process.”

On Wednesday, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors unanimously continued a state of emergency they declared in June due to the cross-border pollution.

Gov. Gavin Newsom and President Joe Biden have not publicly commented on whether they would declare one.

Last month, Newsom urged the president to immediately free up \$300 million to make urgent repairs to the plant, but he stopped short of proclaiming an emergency.

August 2023

[Senators request millions more to fix Tijuana sewage crisis - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com)

Amid new spills and stink, U.S. senators request millions more to fix Tijuana sewage crisis



The International Wastewater Treatment Plant in the Tijuana River Valley. (Alejandro Tamayo/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

California Senators Padilla and Feinstein are asking Congress to double federal funding to make urgent repairs to the failing treatment plant in South County

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER AUG. 30, 2023 6:15 PM PT

California's Senators are urging Congress for \$310 million in new emergency spending to fix the rampant sewage pollution that repeatedly flows from Tijuana to San Diego's South County shoreline.

On Tuesday, Senators Alex Padilla and Dianne Feinstein called on Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senator Patty Murray, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, to include the funds in the upcoming emergency supplemental bill that is already proposing billions for other disaster relief.

The Biden administration has requested \$40 billion in emergency funding, which includes \$24 billion in aid for Ukraine, \$12 billion for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's depleting fund as it responds to disasters like Maui's wildfires, and \$4 billion to address border issues, such as shelter and services for migrants.

In their letter, the Senators said more money to tackle the sewage crisis must be added to that list because it is "fouling California beaches, degrading U.S. Navy readiness, and harming the health of Customs and Border Protection agents, U.S. Coast Guardsmen, and millions of Americans in Southern California."

An additional \$310 million would supplement the \$300 million in federal money elected leaders and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency previously secured to double the capacity of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plan in San Diego.

The funds would bring efforts closer to covering a \$630-million plan federal environmental regulators in California said would help fix the issue. The strategy, in part, involves installing a pumping system in the Tijuana River to prevent contaminated flows from fouling shorelines as far north as Coronado.

Water from Tijuana has long been sent to the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant or pumped into the Pacific Ocean from Mexico. But Tijuana's faulty system is constantly overwhelmed as its population rises, sending millions of gallons of raw sewage and trash through the river valley.

Mexico also has a broken wastewater facility in Punta Bandera, about six miles south of the border, which releases more than 30 million gallons of sewage per day into the sea, causing beach closures all along South County. Major upgrades to the San Antonio de Los Buenos treatment plant are expected to kick off this year.



Signs from the County of San Diego Environmental Health & Quality warn those at Imperial Beach of sewage/chemical contaminated water and to keep out of the water in May. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Meanwhile, the hundreds of millions of dollars previously set aside could easily just go toward repairs. The plant will likely need as much as \$150 million for maintenance before it can expand.

“This is so frustrating,” said Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre, whose small coastal city has had its shoreline closed since December 2021. “So I think that’s great that (the senators) are highlighting the very glaring absence of (funding for this issue) as (the supplemental funding) currently stands.”

The Senate Appropriations Committee is expected to consider the emergency supplemental funds next month.

Aguirre has received support from the county, California’s legislative and congressional delegation and, most recently, the League of California Cities’ San Diego County Division, in her call urging Gov. Gavin Newsom to proclaim the Tijuana sewage pollution an emergency.

Earlier this month, the governor asked President Joe Biden and Congress to immediately free up the \$300

million to repair the treatment plan. He did not declare an emergency, however.

The calls come after Tropical Storm Hilary's remnants resulted in 2.3 billion gallons of untreated wastewater flowing down the Tijuana River, according to the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission. About 90 percent was rainwater, the agency said. Damage and repair costs following the storm are still being assessed, Morgan Rogers, operations manager for the IBWC in San Diego, said Wednesday.

On Monday, a sewage spill from the Hollister Street pump station near the border seemed to have worsened an already nightmarish situation for South County residents. The IBWC said a buildup of sediment led to more than 20,000 gallons of sewage spilling onto the street, which is near several equestrian and hiking areas.

"We are in the process of repairing or replacing the failed pumps at Hollister pump station, restoring flows from the canyon collectors, and stopping the transboundary flows," the agency said in a Wednesday email. It did not say when the restoration is expected.

Residents in the area and around Imperial Beach have taken to social media to express their frustration over lingering putrid odors, many saying they are losing sleep.

"It's 2:45 a.m. and once again I got (woken) up by a bad smell from outside. And once again got up and closed my window," Susie Wigginton posted on Facebook.

Former Imperial Beach Mayor Serge Dedina said the issue has gotten so bad that he decided last year to move his conservation organization, Wildcoast, out of Imperial Beach and to Del Mar because he and his staff have gotten sick from airborne fecal matter.

Residents are continuing their push to sound the alarm on the urgent need to stop the cross-border water pollution. On Friday, Coronado residents are spearheading a rally on Friday with environmental nonprofits and activists to push the crisis to be declared an emergency. It is scheduled for 4 p.m. at the Coronado Central Beach on G Avenue and Ocean Boulevard.

[Tropical Storm Hilary made South Bay sewage woes worse | KPBS Public Media \(kpbs.org\)](https://www.kpbs.org/news/local/2015/09/04/tropical-storm-hilary-made-south-bay-sewage-woes-worse)

Tropical Storm Hilary made South Bay sewage woes worst

By Erik Anderson / Environment Reporter Contributors: Carlos Castillo / Video Journalist
Published August 23, 2023 at 6:23 PM PDT

The sun has returned to Southern California but the region is continuing to feel the effects of last weekend's unusual storm. KPBS Environment Reporter Erik Anderson has details.

Tropical Storm Hilary left a softer-than-anticipated mark in most parts of San Diego County, but that is not the case near the international border.

The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), the federal agency that operates the sewage treatment plant just north of the U.S. Mexico border, said more than 2 billion gallons of contaminated water flowed across the border during and after the storm.

Days after the storm, polluted water continues to flow through the Tijuana River channel and into the United States. Those stormwater flows eventually find their way to the ocean.

“That brought in a lot of extra wastewater, as well as a lot of extra trash,” said Morgan Rogers, the engineer who is the IBWC regional manager at the sewage plant. “It did cause some problems with some of our pumps.”

Rogers said crews worked during the storm to keep trash from clogging the flow of water into the plant, but at one point those flows just became too large.

“We have equalization tanks to store some flow during the surges but they were getting close to overflowing,” Morgan said. “And we actually bypassed our secondary treatment for a period of about 10 hours.”

State water quality officials say they will likely issue clean water act violations, but the state's authority is limited.

The state cannot fine a federal agency for violating a discharge permit, which sets guidelines for what the federal government can and cannot do at the sewage plant.

San Diego Regional Water Quality Control officials also cannot punish the federal government for polluted flows that enter the United States through the Tijuana River channel.



Two people brave the rain and wind as Tropical Storm Hilary hits Imperial Beach on Aug. 20, 2023 *Erik Anderson / KPBS*

It is a frustrating situation for local officials.

“We simply have to get that water out of the river and into a treatment plant,” said David Gibson, the executive director of the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board. “And into beneficial reuse if practicable, but discharged three miles off shore and in compliance with the clean water act if nothing else.”

Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre has intensified calls recently for California Governor Gavin Newsom and the Biden Administration to declare states of emergency because of the persistent cross-border flows. That could free up state and federal funding to work toward a solution.

The governor’s office is in regular contact with local officials, his staff was briefed by water quality officials on Tuesday. And both the state and federal governments appear sympathetic, but neither has taken the requested action.

The Environmental Protection Agency has developed a \$630 million plan to more than double the capacity of the international wastewater treatment plant, add some water capture systems and improve the wastewater system in Tijuana.

But the plan is only partially funded and local officials were flummoxed to learn recently that the existing sewage treatment plant near the border needs \$150 million dollars in repairs.

Meanwhile, as water contact warnings are lifted at most of the county's beaches, sewage contamination remains a concern along the south county shore.

Regional Water Quality Control officials say the beach near the mouth of the Tijuana River, just north of the border, has been posted as unsafe for human contact for 623 consecutive days as of Wednesday.

[Newsom to Biden and Congress: Make federal funds available to fix Tijuana sewage crisis - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/national/Newsom-to-Biden-and-Congress-Make-federal-funds-available-to-fix-Tijuana-sewage-crisis-2020-07-23)

Newsom to Biden and Congress: Make federal funds available to fix Tijuana sewage crisis



The South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant in San Ysidro. (Howard Lipin/U-T San Diego)

South County leaders want the state and federal governments to declare cross-border pollution an emergency

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER AUG. 9, 2023 6:27 PM PT

Gov. Gavin Newsom is urging President Joe Biden and Congress to immediately free up \$300 million to make urgent repairs to the failing and outdated treatment plant at the U.S.-Mexico border that continues to allow Tijuana sewage to foul South County shorelines, but he stopped short of declaring an emergency.

In letters sent Wednesday to the president, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, he asks that they direct the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the International Boundary and Water Commission to use the funding Congress appropriated three years ago to repair and expand the federal wastewater treatment plant.

Newsom also requested that they dedicate additional funding via a supplemental appropriations bill and in the fiscal year 2025 budget. Supplemental appropriation bills provide new funding when emergencies arise involving the safety of human life or the protection of property, such as recovering from a natural disaster.

Newsom's letters stopped short of asking the federal government to declare a state of emergency. He also did not indicate whether he would declare one in California, a move that members of San Diego's congressional delegation and other South County leaders have urged Biden and Newsom to do.

State coastal commissioners and South County leaders called Newsom's plea an "inflection point" in recent efforts to direct the federal government's attention to the issue, but said an emergency declaration remains vital.

"It is an emergency," said Commissioner Meagan Harmon, whom Newsom appointed to represent the south central coast. "Both a state and federal declaration of such is necessary and it is what the people of Imperial Beach and the surrounding communities deserve and no less."

Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre said such declarations would "cut through the appropriations process or cut through the red tape, to make sure that all of the funding that's necessary (goes) to the

plant.”

She added that the state and federal governments should act as swiftly as Philadelphia Gov. Josh Shapiro, who issued a disaster declaration in June following the collapse of a freeway overpass, waiving bidding and contracting procedures to efficiently repair the infrastructure. Biden followed with \$3 million in quick-release funds to cover costs.

A Newsom spokesperson said the governor has not declared a state of emergency because “we’re trying to get the federal assistance we need to help address the issue because it’s obviously a federal issue for the most part.”

Reports of sewage leaking from Tijuana into San Diego date to the 1930s, but the Mexican border city’s wastewater system has suffered pipeline breaks and other challenges over the past two years, causing 30 million gallons of partially treated sewage to flow into the Pacific Ocean every day.

The plan has been to expand the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, which the U.S. section of the IBWC operates, using the \$300 million. But those funds may now be diverted for deferred maintenance, which could cost up to \$150 million.

“This is a cross-border situation,” said National City Mayor Ron Morrison. “The pressure needs to be put on the Mexican government, too. It’s got to be a multi- approach. On our side, we definitely need to declare an emergency because it’s a health emergency.”

The pollution kept South County shorelines, from Imperial Beach to Coronado, closed at a record pace last year and communities there continue to see their beaches shuttered this year. It has changed the way of life for many local families and even training for Navy SEALs and lifeguards.

“Just this past weekend, I was out surfing with my partner and we became sick and he had to call off work,” said resident Lesly Gallegos, who is an outreach coordinator with San Diego Coastkeeper. “It’s not the first time this has happened and many people in the community experience much worse.” Coastal Commissioners agreed to reach out to the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties to get their formal support in calling Biden to fast-track more spending on the issue.

Wednesday’s efforts come amid other, recent actions. In early June, mayors from across the county sent a

letter to Biden requesting that he declare the situation an emergency. Later that month, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors declared a local state of emergency — the first-ever on the Tijuana sewage regionally.

July 2023

[County supervisors push for federal emergency on Tijuana River pollution | KPBS Public Media \(kpbs.org\)](https://www.kpbs.org/news/local/2023/07/05/san-diego-county-supervisors-push-for-federal-emergency-on-tijuana-river-pollution/)

County supervisors push for federal emergency on Tijuana River pollution

By City News Service Published July 5, 2023 at 4:39 PM PDT Erik Anderson / KPBS



A berm holds back water in the Tijuana River channel just south of the U.S. Mexico border on Jun 14, 2022.

County Supervisor Chair Nora Vargas and Vice Chair Terra Lawson-Remer Wednesday continued their push to have the U.S.-Mexico transboundary sewage pollution from the Tijuana River declared a federal emergency, following the closure of several county beaches on the Fourth of July.

They noted July 4th was the 569th consecutive day of beach closures in the region due "As we saw this past holiday weekend with some of our beaches closed during Independence Day, the Tijuana River Valley environmental pollution crisis has reached a tipping point and we urgently need the federal government to step in and help us bring clean water to the families and visitors of San Diego County," Vargas said. "These closures continue to severely impact the life, health, and economic well-being of so many and we need a federal state of emergency if we truly want to address this issue."

Last Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors declared the first state of emergency on Tijuana Sewage and called on the Biden Administration to declare a federal emergency.

Following the vote, San Diego County's Assembly and State Senate delegations wrote to Gov. Gavin Newsom requesting the state of California join the emergency declaration, and the region's congressional representatives elevated this request directly to Biden.

"If 35 million gallons of sewage were being spilled on the National Mall in D.C. each day, our government would've taken action long ago," said Lawson-Remer. "Yet here we are, celebrating the 4th of July holiday with many of our region's beaches unsafe to swim in. environment, and our economy. We need a federal emergency declared and action now."

Vargas and Lawson-Remer added signatures of 2,500 county residents to a petition calling on federal action from Biden.

Paloma Aguirre, elected last year to be Imperial Beach's mayor-at-large, said her community cannot wait another 15 years for improvements.

"Imperial Beach has suffered for decades from cross-border pollution, with its beach being closed every day this year...The impacts are quite, quite severe," she said.

[All the community benefits lost because of the sewage - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.org\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.org)

What's been lost with South County beach closures? A way of life



Max Romanillo, 9, of San Diego, holds his board before going into the water as part of YMCA Camp Surf at Imperial Beach on Thursday, June 29, 2023 in San Diego, CA. This was only the third time since December that campers were allowed to swim due to the sewage crisis. (Meg McLaughlin / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Community groups are banding together to urge state and federal officials to address cross-border pollution

BY TAMMY MURGA | REPORTER JULY 3, 2023 5 AM PT

A June 24 county email notifying lifeguards and YMCA employees at Camp Surf in Imperial Beach that it was safe to get in the ocean at the Silver Strand shoreline felt like a golden ticket had dropped in their inboxes.

They knew the opening would be short-lived and they might not get another chance this summer to teach youth how to navigate the waves because of the continuous sewage contamination from over the border in Tijuana.

South County has endured beach [closures](#) for more than a year and a half. And though contamination has disproportionately plagued the area for decades, several local nonprofits say they feel the brunt of the crisis more than ever.

It is forcing the organizations to end or reduce programming that is often free or affordable and conveniently located for residents, especially youth who have yet to visit the beach for the first time. With the shorelines closed, organizations have added new expenses as they shuffle to move their popular programs away from beaches.

Despite those efforts, many are losing enrollees.

“We have the reputation of being a camp that offers surfing, it’s in our name, but we can’t really offer that anymore like we used to,” said Kapili Pasa, a waterfront manager at Camp Surf. “The youth missing out on these opportunities to be in the water is a huge disservice.”

Politicians have largely been the loudest to sound the alarm about the persistent water contamination and demand more be done to solve the crisis. Now, nonprofits are adding their voices. On Wednesday, about a dozen groups met for the first time at Camp Surf to brainstorm ideas.

What’s been lost?

From southeastern San Diego to Coronado to the border, organizations said coastal places to recreate are becoming more scarce.

Imperial Beach canceled its Junior Lifeguard program this year because of staffing challenges.

It’s difficult “to hire folks to be lifeguards at a beach where they can get sick from rescuing people” in polluted waters, Mayor Paloma Aguirre said. The popular program typically has about 120 to 150 enrollees between the ages of 9 and 17.

Generations of families in small, working-class Imperial Beach have surfed and participated in the junior lifeguard program. David Preston is among them, but fears his children will miss out.

“Now, I’m trying to figure out: will my son be a lifeguard at Silver Strand,” he said.

Camp Surf is one of the few places the youth in South County can access programs for surfing and boogie

boarding. Campers have managed to get in the water about three times since December, according to the YMCA.

It's not strictly a destination for surfing. Campers partake in archery, skating, biking and other sporting activities when the beaches shut down. But with the Pacific Ocean as their backdrop, surfing is a major draw.

To maintain the program, the organization has pivoted to transporting campers by bus to Mission Beach, nearly 20 miles north of Imperial Beach, about three times per week or whenever permits are granted. Camp Surf even designated a staff member to solely focus on transportation efforts.

“When we travel, we also have to have more staff to supervise kids because they're in public places,” said Jamie Cosson, executive director of YMCA of San Diego Overnight camps.

The YMCA said it has reserved, on an on-call basis, a San Marcos Unified School District bus and driver to transport kids, which is estimated to cost the organization about \$20,000 by the end of summer.



San Diego, CA - June 29: A rock climbing wall at YMCA Camp Surf on Thursday, June 29, 2023 in San Diego, CA. The wall was created as an activity for the kids on days that they could not go into the water. (Meg McLaughlin / The San Diego Union-Tribune) (Meg McLaughlin/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Camp Surf's group and family attendance has steadily declined. Pre-COVID, the organization saw an average of about 7,000 enrollees. Last year, it had 6,121 and it projects having about 4,800 this year.

California State Parks, which runs its own junior lifeguard program at Silver Strand, has shifted

programming away from the ocean and to the bayside.

National advocacy nonprofit Surfrider Foundation has its largest chapter in San Diego County. With more than 3,800 members, the group has worked for more than 10 years to address the sewage spill.

It offers community programs focused on educating the public about issues affecting the ocean. The cross-border spill is its top priority, but it has gotten so bad that some of the organization's programming has had to stop.

Surfrider no longer hosts its beach cleanups at the Tijuana River Valley because volunteers have gotten sick despite wearing protective gear, said Sarah Davidson, a program manager with the organization. It has also canceled its guided, community tour along the border, where participants ride bikes and in vans, stopping at six key viewpoints that allow them to witness and better understand the issue affecting both sides of the border.

Outdoor Outreach, a southeast San Diego nonprofit that connects youth with multiple recreational activities, was forced to cancel about 60 outings last year because of beach closures, said Sonia Diaz, the organization's public policy manager. Its surf program is typically held at Camp Surf but most recently offered in La Jolla through a partnership with the Scripps Coastal Reserve.

"While that's worked out temporarily for us, it's still not a long-term solution and we would love to just have our programs right here on the beach," said Diaz Wednesday from Camp Surf. "And that's one goal of the organization, to not just connect youth to other areas of the county to recreate, but also realize that there are natural spaces to recreate in their own communities. And, unfortunately, we don't have access to that."

Lisa Cumper is a tribal historic preservation officer with the Jamul Indian Village. She said Indigenous youth have missed out on opportunities to learn "about their tribal heritage here on the coast."

"We want to teach them a part of our creation story, how it began here in the ocean and we do this by being here in person," she said. "And it's really important for us to clean it up, get the support and bring us back to our coast."

A pivotal moment

Coming together to form a united voice is timelier than ever, nonprofit groups said.

Their Wednesday gathering came a day after the county Board of Supervisors declared the sewage issue an emergency, calling on the federal government to expedite more funds to fix the pollution. The vote came after officials learned that of the \$300 million secured to expand a federal wastewater treatment plant in San Diego that treats sewage from Tijuana only half of those funds would cover maintenance costs.



Coronado, CA - July 02: On Saturday, July 2, 2022 in Coronado, CA., posted signs at Coronado Beach warn the public, “Warning Beach Water May contain Sewage And May Cause Illness.” (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune) (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

“We took two steps forward and now we’re taking five steps back, unfortunately,” said Aguirre, adding that state and federal emergency declarations would mean immediate access to funding. “So, that’s the effort right now. We’re at a pivotal point. We just need everybody to help support and uplift this effort.”

The call to action

The nonprofits are drafting and signing a letter of their own, urging California to fulfill its commitment

“to support environmental justice communities” and address cross-border pollution.

“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,” reads the letter.

“For many programs, this is a burden that organizational resources cannot overcome. The consequence is that many young people, especially those in South Bay communities, are missing out on critical experiences,” it adds.

The groups said they want to create an online hub where residents can access nonpartisan information about the issue and ways they can get involved.

Grassroots efforts will be needed to educate more people in South County, who are largely low-income and speak Spanish and Tagalog, said Breny Aceituno of the nonprofit Partnerships for Success, which focuses on reducing the onset and progression of substance abuse among youth.

Groups and local leaders said they will work to make clear what they have lost as a result of the sewage crisis.

“Let’s make sure that when we articulate our voices, we tell everybody this is the most important thing that we can do, to make sure that our kids and our families have access to this wonderful, free resource,” said Serge Dedina, former Imperial Beach mayor and executive director of nonprofit Wildcoast.

June 2023

[Supervisors OK emergency declaration on cross-border pollution | KPBS Public Media \(kpbs.org\)](#)

Supervisors OK emergency declaration on cross-border pollution

By City News Service Published June 27, 2023 at 4:43 PM PDT Angela Carone / KPBS



The San Diego County Administration building in downtown San Diego. Sep. 25, 2013.

San Diego County supervisors unanimously approved a proclamation Tuesday declaring a state of emergency due to pollution and sewage flowing across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Board Chairwoman Nora Vargas and Vice Chair Terra Lawson-Remer introduced the proclamation, which asks Gov. Gavin Newsom and President Joe Biden to issue similar declarations, "suspend red tape that may hinder response efforts, and expedite access to federal resources for San Diego County.

"This is the same process recently followed by local agencies to resolve the water quality crisis in Flint, Michigan," county officials added.

Supervisors directed the chief administrative officer to report back within 120 days with a review of economic impacts resulting from U.S.-Mexico border transboundary pollution, and pursue available federal and state funding. Lawson-Remer and Vargas represent districts with coastal regions.

According to both supervisors, for several decades "the Tijuana River has caused immense devastation to the coastlines and beaches of San Diego County, resulting in contamination and pollution."

Extensive documentation by the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission has found "that since 2018, more than 100 billion gallons of toxic effluent have entered the United States through the Tijuana River," according to Lawson-Remer and Vargas.

They added that "an alarming 35 billion gallons have crossed the international border flowing north from another broken sewage treatment plant in Punta Bandera" since Dec. 28, 2022, which impacts the San

Diego coastline during the summer.

Another consequence of poor water quality is Imperial Beach's south side being closed for over 550 consecutive days due to the persistently poor water quality, Vargas and Lawson-Remer said.

"Today, we're declaring once and for all a state of emergency in the Tijuana River Valley," Vargas said, adding that county beach and baywater data backed the need for a proclamation.

Lawson-Remer said portions of Imperial Beach "have been shuttered every day this year" while sewage flows into coastal areas. "This is absolutely unacceptable," she added.

While the county has spent money to improve storm water infrastructure, half of the \$300 million provided by the federal government will go toward upgrades and deferred maintenance, rather than expanding a wastewater treatment plant, Lawson-Remer said. "We cannot spend years waiting for the fixes to be made — we need action now," she added.

Lawson-Remer said the proclamation will cut through the bureaucracy, and will put pressure on the Mexican government to do its part. During public comment, residents including the Imperial Beach mayor, asked the board for the proclamation.

Paloma Aguirre, elected last year to be Imperial Beach's mayor-at-large, said her community cannot wait another 15 years for improvements.

"Imperial Beach has suffered for decades from cross-border pollution, with its beach being closed every day this year ... the impacts are quite, quite severe," she added.

Jack Fisher, a longtime Imperial Beach resident, said his town is now known for beautiful beaches and restaurants, rather than biker gangs and bars, but the water quality situation needs to change.

"It used to be easy to overlook a small southern city in California," he said, "but we know now this beach services the region, which is about 650,000 people, who have not had the opportunity to enjoy the beach, to put their feet in the water."

A woman who identified herself as a lifeguard at Imperial Beach said toxic waste directly affects her and

her colleagues' health and safety, as they must perform rescues or dives even with beach closures.

Lifeguards are exposed to serious health risks, including hepatitis or gastrointestinal problems, and that has impacted staffing levels, she said.

"Every day that passes is another 35 million gallons of waste that enters California waters," she added.

Chula Vista resident Alan Curry, who said he lived in Imperial Beach in the 1980s, suggested that focusing on how U.S.-Mexico border commerce is also affected by pollution would result in a stronger proclamation.

One county resident said he opposed the emergency declaration, in part because the treatment plant doesn't work efficiently.

[Environment Report: Congressional Reps 'Shocked' by Broken Border Plant | Voice of San Diego \(voiceofsandiego.org\)](https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/environment-report-congressional-reps-shocked-by-broken-border-plant/)

Environment Report: Congressional Reps 'Shocked' by Broken Border Plant

A plant treating Tijuana's sewage at the U.S.-Mexican border needs more maintenance than Congress banked on funding.

By MacKenzie Elmer, June 26, 2023



California Sen. Alex Padilla talks with South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant Area Operations Manager Morgan Rogers on June 5, 2023. The two overlook the overloaded primary treatment system. / Photo by MacKenzie Elmer

San Diego’s Congressional delegates had no idea a U.S. treatment plant at the Mexican border needed such pricey repairs.

News dropped last week that the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment plant was so run down that fixing it would eat up almost half the money Congress dedicated toward building a bigger and better plant.

“We always knew that hundreds of millions more would be needed to build out the full suite of projects to tackle the problem in the long term, but this new price tag for the plant expansion alone was a very unwelcome shock,” wrote MaryAnne Pintar, Congressman Scott Peters’ chief of staff, in an email Monday. “Congress may have the power of the purse, but Congress can’t fix it if we don’t know how broken it is.”

It’s unclear how or why past leaders of the International Boundary and Water Commission – or the IBWC, which owns and operates the South Bay Plant – allowed it to fall so far behind on maintenance.

In a recent interview, IBWC’s current leader Maria-Elena Giner didn’t point fingers at anyone but herself.

“The person responsible for advocating for this agency is the commissioner, and that’s me,” Giner said. But it’s clear the state of the plant is a problem she inherited, not created, when President Joe Biden appointed her to take over the helm at IBWC in 2021.

The aging plant has been working overtime for many months as it takes on more sewage than it was built to treat from Tijuana due to numerous breaks of pipes or pumps on the Mexican side of the border. Some of the plant’s critical hardware is original to when it was completed in 1997.

And the South Bay plant isn’t something that’s particularly easy to fix. In the absence of a functioning wastewater treatment plant in the bustling city of Tijuana, South Bay basically lives to handle the city’s sewage, even though it can’t handle or control how much Mexico sends it.

You can’t just turn the plant off to do the necessary repairs. David Gibson, executive officer of San Diego’s Regional Water Quality Control Board, compared it to re-construction of Terminal 1 at the San Diego International Airport: Planes and passengers are still bustling in and out of the old, cramped terminal while the airport builds an expansion next door.

“Except, the airport can do construction during evening hours when air traffic is slow. The treatment plant runs 24 hours a day,” Gibson said.

San Diego’s Congressional delegates are now on extra-high alert over the state of the South Bay plant. They’ll have to come up with more money so the U.S. can hold up its end of a treaty signed with Mexico that commits funds from both countries to stop Tijuana sewage pollution.

Right now, the IBWC can only use money appropriated to them by Congress via the U.S. State Department, which oversees the IBWC’s budget. Importantly, this year’s State Department budget request includes some language that would let the IBWC accept money from non-federal sources.

Another thing that might help mobilize more dollars: the San Diego County Board of Supervisors vote Tuesday on whether to declare a local state of emergency on the Tijuana River sewage crisis. Paloma Aguirre, mayor of Imperial Beach, which suffers continuous beach closures from sewage contamination, was the first to declare the emergency in her town.

If they can get Gov. Gavin Newsom on board, California can ask the Biden Administration to declare a

federal emergency, thereby fast-tracking money toward fixing the plant.

In Other News

- Watch me try to breathe feet away from a vat of raw Tijuana sewage at the broken treatment plant in a new Tik Tok video.
- We now know the terrible fate of those aboard the Titan submersible that imploded on its way to the Titanic shipwreck site. San Diego-based Scripps Institution of Oceanography scientists shared some harrowing experiences using submersibles in the name of deep ocean research with the Washington Post.
- San Diego Community Power, the region's publicly owned power company, green-lighted two solar plus battery storage projects in Imperial valley and Clark County, Nevada, which should be online in 2025. (Union-Tribune)

[The US Plant Treating Tijuana's Sewage Is Busted | Voice of San Diego \(voiceofsandiego.org\)](https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/news/the-us-plant-treating-tijuana-s-sewage-is-busted/)

The US Plant Treating Tijuana's Sewage is Busted

Precious federal dollars that were intended to build a bigger and better treatment plant at the border will have to be spent on fixing the old one.

By MacKenzie Elmer June 22, 2023



California Sen. Alex Padilla talks with South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant Area Operations Manager Morgan Rogers on June 5, 2023. The two overlook the overloaded primary treatment system. / Photo by MacKenzie Elmer

A San Diego treatment plant at the U.S.-Mexico border is having a hard time cleaning Tijuana sewage before it contaminates the Pacific Ocean.

That's because parts of the plant are basically broken, which is not great news for beach communities waiting on the federal government to build a bigger, better plant with newly-promised funding from the U.S.- Mexico-Canada trade agreement. It's clear now that a large chunk of that money will be spent fixing parts of the old plant before building anything new.

Some of the plant's most critical equipment hasn't been replaced since former Vice President Al Gore helped break ground on the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment plant in 1994.

It was built to treat 25 million gallons of Tijuana sewage per day, pollution that would otherwise spill over the border into the Tijuana River and eventually the ocean, closing beaches up and down the coast.

Today, the plant is often running on overdrive. There's widespread acknowledgement that the government initially built a plant that was too small. But Congress put \$300 million on the table in 2020 to double its size.

The plant now needs about half that amount in repairs, according to a recent assessment of plant facilities.

"I had sticker shock," said Héctor Aguirre, assistant director of EPA's regional water division, when he reflected on the depth of deferred maintenance. The EPA is in charge of the plant expansion project.

Others were less surprised.

"The Water Board has been shouting for people to pay attention to this for years," said David Gibson, executive officer of the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board. "We've been very clear that \$300 million wasn't half of what was needed to do the job right."

The plant has a two-step treatment system and the first step is what's not working. That's called primary treatment, where solids like human waste, trash and sand or other large matter that make its way into wastewater settle-out and separate from liquids. But the tanks are so overrun, the end product of the plant

is much like watery poo.

The plant could only remove about 34 percent of the gunk in the water, according to an April water quality report. It should be hitting 85 percent to comply with the Clean Water Act.

Other stuff is broken, too. For instance, the U.S. can't control the flow of sewage into the treatment plant from Mexico because a valve is stuck open. The plant has racked up 218 related Water Quality Control Board violations since 2021.

The city of Imperial Beach, San Diego's southernmost town where beaches are polluted by Tijuana sewage most of the time, declared a state of emergency over the pollution on Jan. 6.

The International Boundary and Water Commission – or IBWC, the federal agency that handles binational border water issues – built, owns and operates the South Bay plant among other infrastructure along the border. Its leader, Commissioner Maria-Elena Giner, appointed by President Joe Biden in 2021, revealed recently that her agency has documented \$1 billion in things it needs to fix and build and only a \$50 million budget to do it.

IBWC spent less than \$5 million on major maintenance at the South Bay plant over the last 15 years, Giner said. About 37 percent of the pipes, pumps and other sewage-separating infrastructure need immediate attention.

“It's not going to collapse. It's in need of serious repairs,” Giner said in an interview with Voice of San Diego.

That's why Giner invited California Sen. Alex Padilla to tour South Bay's huge, concrete vats of stagnant Tijuana sewage sitting in inoperable primary treatment tanks earlier this month. These tanks have filled up with so much sand and sediment that they need to be cleaned before they can function properly.



International Boundary and Water Commission leader Maria-Elena Giner talks with Sen. Alex Padilla atop the non- functioning primary treatment system at the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant. EPA Regional 9 director Martha Guzman looks into the primary treatment vat. / Photo by MacKenzie Elmer

Giner said Padilla is the first high-ranking official to visit South Bay since Gore. As the two walked the plank between the pungent primary treatment vats, Giner explained the state of disarray she inherited at IBWC two years ago.

“There were spreadsheets all over the place. There wasn’t a work order system,” Giner said.

In short, IBWC administrations past didn’t have a clear understanding of what infrastructure needed fixing and when. Giner said that when she took over, she visited all eight field offices from San Diego to Mercedes, Texas to take stock of all the maintenance needs.

“People were stunned,” Giner said.

While South Bay needs an alarming number of upgrades, there’s also a leaking dam in Del Rio, Texas, a \$276 million project. It’s up to Congress to decide how much of the U.S. State Department budget goes toward the IBWC. Padilla called South Bay’s upgrades a top priority during his June visit.

“Over the course of decades there has been vast insufficient operations funding that leads to conditions like this which are unacceptable,” Padilla said during a June press conference at the South Bay plant.

Ginger said she hopes to direct some money in the IBWC budget toward fixing the South Bay plant's primary treatment system. And, she'll be testifying before the U.S. House of Representatives in July to make the case that IBWC needs help.

May 2023

[Coronado beaches closed from Tijuana sewage ahead of Memorial Day weekend - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com)

Coronado beaches closed from Tijuana sewage ahead of Memorial Day weekend



Swimming was restricted at the beach in Coronado as a result of sewage pollution spilling over the border from Tijuana on Friday. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The San Diego region's southern shorelines have been shuttered for months as a result of water pollution from Mexico. Will they reopen in time for summer?

BY JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH MAY 26, 2023 5:43 PM PT

The beaches in Coronado were relatively empty headed into Memorial Day weekend. While a few families splashed in the surf Friday, most folks kept their distance, playing Frisbee or lounging in the sand.

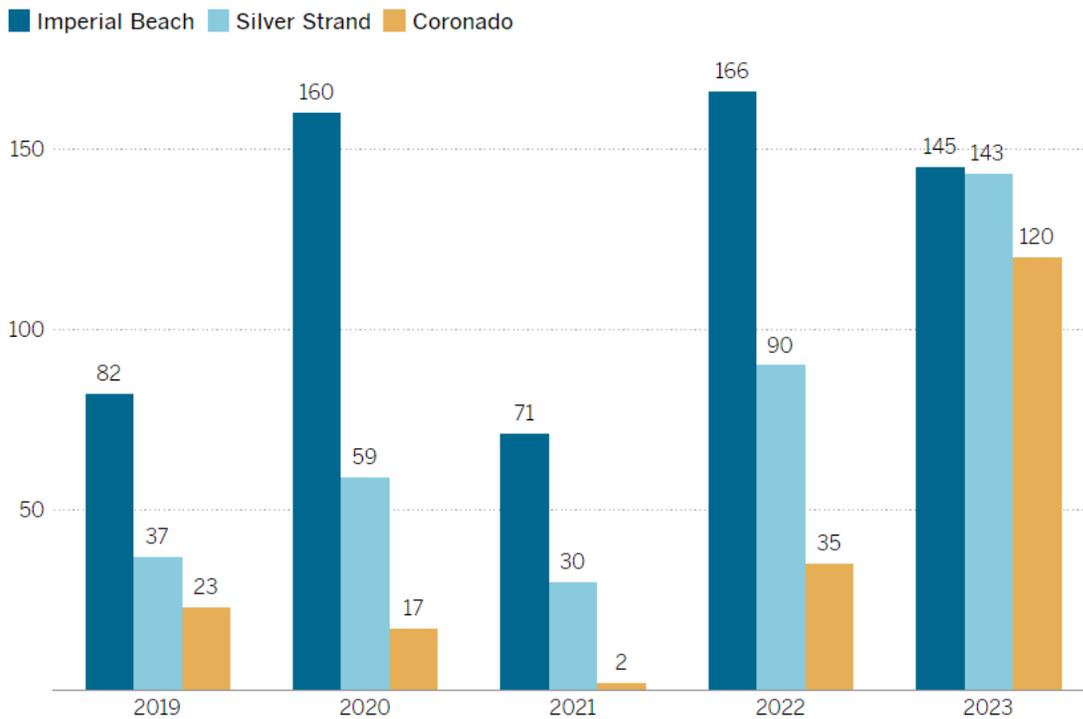
Nobody, save a couple of brave surfers, ventured very far offshore — thanks to roving lifeguards and the now-familiar yellow and red placards that read: “Keep out of water.”

Sewage spilling over the border from Mexico has for months shuttered shorelines from Imperial Beach to Coronado. Local leaders had hoped the rain, which flushes pollution through the Tijuana River into the South Bay, would’ve subsided by the unofficial start of tourist season.

But no luck. Continuous downpours and Tijuana’s crumbling pipes have kept Imperial Beach waters closed since last December, and Coronado has so far racked up an eye- popping 120 days this year during which ocean swimming was officially restricted.

South Bay beaches plagued by closures in first half of 2023

Number of days beaches were closed to swimming as a result of sewage and other pollution spilling over the border from Mexico.



2023 data through May 26.

Source: San Diego County Department of Environmental Health and Quality

Michelle Gilchrist / The San Diego Union-Tribune

Around noon on Friday, Janci Farwell of Los Angeles was building sandcastles in Coronado with her 2-

year-old grandson. They were using buckets of ocean water until a lifeguard warned her about the sewage.

“The lifeguard said that she herself has been very, very sick from the fecal contamination,” said the 65-year-old. “I guess we’ll check into that.”



Janci Farwell from Los Angeles was shocked when a lifeguard alerted her to sewage contamination in the water off Coronado. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Farwell, who has a condo in the area, said she didn’t see the closure signs on her way to the beach. The small placards can be easy to miss, at least according to several tourists in the area on Friday.

“Hey, get out of the water,” Amber Merrill called to her daughters, 4 and 7, after suddenly realizing the situation.

Merrill, who came from Tucson, Ariz., to stay at the iconic Hotel del Coronado, said she was wondering why the beach was so empty.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s Memorial Day weekend,” said the 40-year-old. “It’s pretty disappointing to say the least.”

Local businesses haven't been eager to chat about the beach closures. The local chamber of commerce didn't return a request for comment, nor did several prominent establishments including the Hotel del Coronado.

Mayor Richard Bailey blamed the unprecedented rainfall.

"Hopefully, the weather will let up here, so we can have an enjoyable summer," he said. "I'm cautiously optimistic."

However, that's far from guaranteed, especially since the county's new DNA-based water quality testing has been showing elevated bacterial levels even under sunny skies. The main culprit is a defunct wastewater facility along the coast in Mexico, about 6 miles south of the border, that spews about 35 million gallons of raw sewage a day into the Pacific Ocean.

"Mexico's dilapidated sewage treatment plant needs to be fixed urgently," said county Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer, whose district includes Coronado.

County health officials and scientists from UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography have found those plumes regularly creep up the coast on so-called south swells, when ocean currents move north from Mexico.

Leaders, uneasy about closing beaches in the summer, last year rolled out a new blue- and-red "warning" sign that gives swimmers discretion over getting in the water. The placards read: "Warning! Beach water may contain sewage and may cause illness."



People were restricted from swimming in the water at Imperial Beach as a result of sewage pollution from Tijuana on Friday. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Still, businesses and public programs haven't wanted to take on the liability. Imperial Beach recently canceled its Junior Lifeguard program this summer, according to officials. At the same time, YMCA's Camp Surf just north of the city is preparing to bus kids to La Jolla and Pacific Beach.

"Hopefully our beach will be open the majority of the time, but we do expect closures, and we'll pivot to alternative programming," said Jamie Cosson, executive director of overnight camps.

Local leaders are hopeful a fix is in the works. The U.S. section of the International Boundary and Water Commission, as well as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, have a \$474 million agreement with Mexico to overhaul wastewater facilities on both sides of the border.

The U.S. federal government has set aside about \$300 million to double the capacity of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, which services Tijuana.

Mexico, for its part, has agreed to pony up \$144 million, in part to replace its own crumbling wastewater plant, known as San Antonio de Los Buenos.

However, the federal agencies will almost certainly need to find additional money to complete all the upgrades by the target date of 2027. EPA said in an email that the agency has cleared major regulatory hurdles toward expanding the international treatment plant and is “evaluating updated project costs and will be sharing them in the coming weeks.”

Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre said she fears projects could drag on if political pressure isn't maintained. She met earlier this month with the governor of Baja California, Marina del Pilar Ávila, then lobbied State Department officials in Washington, D.C.

Aguirre admitted the results were less than reassuring.

“Do we need to demonstrate at the doorsteps of the White House?” she said. “That’s something I’m seriously considering.”

Meanwhile back in Coronado on Friday afternoon, resident Aaron Heitke was fishing on the beach. The 51-year-old, who’s keenly aware of the situation, said he wouldn’t eat anything he caught and is careful not to wade too far out into the water.

“It sucks, but there isn’t a lot we can do about it,” he said. “Hopefully, it opens up this summer.”

March 2023

[Promises, Promises_Tijuana sewage crisis sickens tens of thousands- The Coronado News \(thecoronadonews.com\)](https://www.thecoronadonews.com)

Promises, Promises: Tijuana sewage crisis sickens tens of thousands



Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis has sickened tens of thousands and hospitalized others, including Imperial Beach teacher and surfer Josh Hill.

Investigations Dennis Wagner, Craig Harris, Julieta Soto and Madeline Yang March 9, 2023

During Christmas break in early 2019, Imperial Beach biology teacher Josh Hill headed to the nearby beach for his favorite pastime — surfing.

Hill said he's been sickened at least 30 times over the last decade by ocean water roiling with sewage from Tijuana — suffering rashes, headaches, sinus infections and stomach ailments.

A little illness didn't deter him.

Within days of that outing, however, he started feeling so physically drained that he lay down on the floor at his house. Then he started coughing up blood, and his wife, Audrie, made him go to the hospital.

Hill was diagnosed with a pernicious staph infection known as MRSA, and was hospitalized for a week. He said doctors found a hole the size of a baseball on the upper side of his left lung.



Josh Hill in Imperial Beach. Photo taken by Madeline Yang

“Is it a direct result of surfing? Can I prove it? No. But where else are we finding antibiotic resistant material?” said Hill, father of three young girls. “The thing that breaks my heart is you get sick (from the sewage) and you try to explain to a 2-year-old why you can’t go to the ocean. It’s life threatening and terrible.”

The Coronado News is investigating a nearly century-long legacy of broken promises by United States and Mexican officials that has resulted in raw sewage and other toxic wastes flowing into the Pacific Ocean from Tijuana.

For years, public health officials say they have sampled beach waters of south San Diego County for fecal microbes, getting counts as an indicator for pathogens such as enterococcus, E. Coli, salmonella and MRSA. Exposure to such germs and viruses may lead to diarrhea, vomiting, fever, headaches, respiratory illness, infections, rashes and meningitis.

A University of California San Diego professor has calculated that more than 34,000 people got sickened by sewage at Imperial Beach in 2017, the most recent data available. Pollution from the

ocean last year caused at least 43 closures, advisories and warnings in Imperial Beach, 39 at Silver Strand and 21 in Coronado, county health department records show.



Imperial Beach surfer Josh Hill and others share how they have gotten deathly ill from the pollution in the Pacific Ocean from Mexico. (video on website)

Meanwhile, during the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission meeting on March 2, Operations Manager Morgan Rogers said excess flows are affecting performance of the main treatment facility for Tijuana's sewage.

He said the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, about 2 miles west of the San Ysidro port of entry between the two countries, is designed to handle on average 25 million gallons of effluent per day from Tijuana.

However, since August it has averaged 30.6 million gallons per day, Rogers said.

During the presentation, **IBWC Board Member and Imperial Beach City Councilman Mitch McKay** said **more than 100 billion gallons of wastewater has flowed into the Pacific Ocean since 2018.**

McKay, in an interview, said that's equivalent to roughly 1,200 supertankers with a capacity of 84 million gallons each.

However, the wastewater output doesn't just contaminate water and beaches, raising a red flag for tourists

in coastal communities. It also damages sea life while creating health and logistical problems in pollution zones for beachgoers, Navy SEALs, lifeguards and U.S. Border agents like Christopher Harris.

A border agent's tale

Harris expected scrapes and bruises from rounding up bad guys during his 36 years in law enforcement.

But the former agent said he never imagined getting hospitalized in 2006 from exposure to noxious effluent while trying to arrest illegal immigrants crossing the border from Mexico.

Harris said while searching for two suspects along the Tijuana River he got black, oily mud on his arms and, after using an alcohol gel to remove the muck, broke out in red hives and became gravely ill.



Amber Craig and Chris Harris sit with The Coronado News to discuss Tijuana sewage problems and the influence on U.S. Border Patrol agents. Staff photo by Madeline Yang.

“We accept the risks of being shot at and getting rocks thrown at us. That’s inherent to law enforcement,” Harris said. “But, what we shouldn’t accept is walking into a chemical dump. We don’t expect to work in raw sewage.”

A 2018 Border Patrol study found “transboundary flows” from Tijuana pose a “health and safety risk” to agents as well as individuals apprehended in the area. The study also found those flows include discharges of E. coli, total coliform and enterococcus exceedances which can make people ill.



Morgan Rogers talks with The Coronado News at the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant. Staff photo by Madeline Yang.

Harris, the ex-Border Patrol agent, retired that year after more than two decades with the Border Patrol, but he and former colleague Amber Craig, a supervisor who retired last year, say the threat to agents continues.

Craig said water samples in the river valley typically contain medical waste and hexavalent chromium, a cancer-causing chemical that poisoned the community of Hinkley, and was made notorious in the 2000 film “Erin Brockovich.”

Craig said it’s unlikely that any agents will immediately die from exposure to the toxic waters, but long-term health consequences are likely.

Craig said the U.S. government needs to hit Mexico with sanctions to stop the millions of gallons of sewage flowing into San Diego County, including Coronado. And, she said, new pressure needs to be mounted even though it’s a problem dating back roughly a century.

“It has to be a constant drumbeat,” she said. Harris agrees. “The solution is on the Mexico side, but you have to convince them that it’s worth it,” he said.

The transborder flow

Surfers and other ocean users, who often smelled the sewage and became sick, knew where it was coming from.

Until the past few years, however, there was not conclusive proof.

That changed in **2021** when **Falk Feddersen, an oceanographer at UCSD's Scripps Institute** and other researchers published a study showing the impact of ocean currents on Tijuana effluents.



A lone surfer paddles out to catch a wave next to the Imperial Beach pier in January after winter storms caused transborder sewage flows from the Tijuana River. Staff photo by Dennis Wagner.

By pouring a benign, fluorescent-pink dye in the ocean, Feddersen's team showed how summertime **sewage from an outdated treatment plant at Punta Bandera, six miles south of the border, was carried north to contaminate the San Diego County shoreline.**

Feddersen said the research required simulations to crunch huge data sets – the equivalent of 360 regular computers working together nonstop for more than a month. The key finding was that effluent from Punta

Bandera doesn't just stream to the north, but mostly hugs the coastline until it reaches the mouth of San Diego Bay.

Feddersen, also a surfer, said he was told that Mexican officials reacted with denial when the dynamics were explained to them: "They'd be like, 'No, no, the water at Punta Bandera, it always goes south.'"

Study: About 34,600 sickened in Imperial Beach

Two years ago, Feddersen and others conducted further simulations based on shoreline sampling from 2017.



Signs in Coronado warning people about polluted waters. Staff photo by Madeline Yang.

Using beach recreation data and known illness rates, they calculated how many people likely were sickened in Imperial Beach.

The answer: about 34,600 swimmers over an entire year. **That would be nearly 8% of the estimated 440,000 visitors each year.**

Researchers concluded that 4.5% of swimmers likely became ill during summer months, or 3.8% for the year. At the peak time for tourism, in July and August, more than 40 beach users per hour were sickened, according to the modeling.

Using EPA safety standards, Coronado's shoreline would have required closures 28% of the time from Memorial Day to Labor Day. (Imperial Beach would be 40%; Tijuana would be 60%.)

It could have been worse. Because 2017 was a dry year, Feddersen's study noted, the Tijuana River never had significant flow and wintertime pathogen counts were abnormally low.

Worse in Tijuana

Meantime, it's worth noting that beach contamination is almost certainly worse on the Mexican side of the border.

Margarita Diaz, director of the Baja California environmental organization, Proyecto Fronterizo de Educacion Ambiental, noted that the U.S. government considers seawater unsafe if enterococcus counts exceed 104 per milliliter.

When her group sampled the surf at Playas de Tijuana in January, Diaz said, readings were 2,000 to 5,000 per milliliter.

But Mexican officials rejected the data.

"Every week we do the testing and we give the results to the government," Diaz said. "And the government says, 'You're not a certified lab.'"

No health studies

While there is abundant scientific research linking sewage pathogens to infection and disease, Feddersen and county health officials said they are not aware of any significant epidemiological studies of the phenomenon in Coronado and Imperial Beach.

"The No. 1 thing to make us really sick is norovirus," said Feddersen, who stressed he is not a medical expert. The pathogen causes gastro-intestinal illness characterized by vomiting and diarrhea at the same time.

He said hepatitis is a concern the Tijuana River estuary, and he would not surf waters south of Point Loma when contamination readings are high.

“If the (Tijuana) River’s running or there’s a south swell, forget it,” he added. “And that’s a shame because waves are really f-ing good down there.”



Wildlife can be seen in the Tijuana River estuary in January. Staff photo by Dennis Wagner

The sampling controversy

For years, beach testing results were based on the presence of sewage-related bacteria measured in live cultures, particularly enterovirus, which may survive only six hours. (By contrast, Feddersen said norovirus has a half-life of 10 days in seawater.)

But researchers have found that DNA sampling, which measures the concentration of organisms whether they are dead or alive, is a faster and more accurate measure of disease threat.

Last May, when the county’s Department of Environmental Health switched to a DNA sampling protocol, bacterial readings soared.

Higher counts prompted a dramatic increase in beach closures—and a backlash for some, including coastal entrepreneurs and elected leaders who complained the new testing method was wrecking business.

Coronado Mayor Richard Bailey and then-Imperial Beach Mayor Serge Dedina immediately questioned whether the new protocol set clean-water standards too high.



Coronado Mayor Richard Bailey walking along the beach in Coronado. He lobbied Congress to get funding to expand the wastewater treatment plant at the border. Staff photo by Madeline Yang.

But political leaders face a dilemma: On one hand, beach closures due to contamination undercut tourism economies. On the other hand, publicity and outrage bolster the pressure campaign to solve Tijuana's waste- water calamity.

In the end, county health officials stuck with the new testing protocol but devised a color-coded warning system to indicate whether bacteria concentrations are high – to some extent letting people decide for themselves whether to brave the waters.

Dedina, a surfer who in 2000 co-founded the international coastal conservation organization known as **Wildcoast**, said contamination grew worse for decades as governments on both sides of the border refused to be accountable.

“It was like being in an abusive relationship. Just painful and traumatic for Coronado and Imperial Beach and all our residents,” he said. “And it (sewage) was killing our hotels and tourism economy.”

Dedina recalled catching waves in Imperial Beach three years ago on a beautiful day when the water around him turned murky and fetid with pollution. He soon became sick, and has not surfed local beaches since.

“It became like Russian roulette for me,” he explained.

Ultimately, the two mayors worked on the problem with separate paths.



Then Imperial Beach Mayor Serge Dedina points towards a beach that was closed due to sewage water contamination as it flowed from Tijuana, Mexico, behind, through the Tijuana River, left, and out to sea Friday, March 3, 2017, in Imperial Beach. Dedina called it, “the tsunami of sewage spills.” (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

Bailey said he lobbied Congress to fund the expansion of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plan while Dedina spearheaded a lawsuit against the International Boundary and Water Commission for violating environmental laws.

“Serge and I have had a great partnership the past four years, and we took two complementary paths to pursue the same objective and the results speak for themselves,” Bailey said.

Now, Bailey said, he believes the U.S. government's commitment to spend \$300 million expanding and up- grading the plant in San Ysidro is bringing a solution "closer and closer."

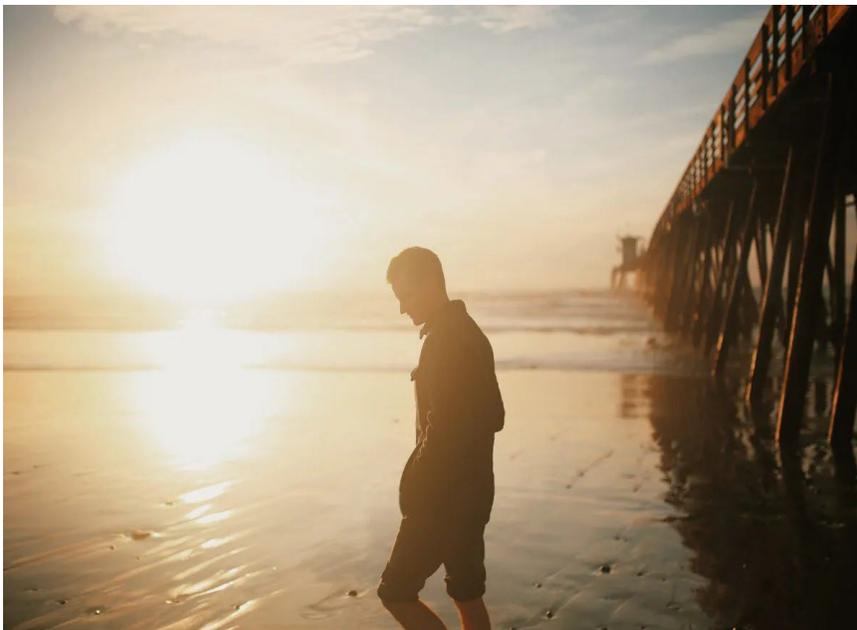
However, IBWC officials have said the funding is not enough to truly fix the problem.

'One day, our prince will come'

In the meantime, Hill, the Mar Vista High School teacher in Imperial Beach, said he has begun tasting the ocean to determine whether it's safe to go in, based on the belief among some surfers that a detergent flavor means the water is heavily polluted.

Hill said he's loved the ocean since childhood.

His father, a missionary, first taught him to surf when he was five, driving to La Jolla because even decades ago the family believed the waters were tainted.



Josh Hill at Imperial Beach. Staff photo by Madeline Yang.

"Growing up, I never thought I would have lived down here because it was a rough place," Hill added.

"But there has been a lot of city investment and capital."

Hill said he knows there's danger here, at one of the best surfing spots in San Diego County. But, he and his wife, a fellow teacher, have made the community their home, and they shouldn't have to drive north to escape Tijuana's sewage, he said.

Hill said he's attended numerous rallies to fight for clean water. He's had his students test for pollutants in the ocean. And he tries to be optimistic about getting the problem fixed.

"But you can only be hopeful so many times before you get cynical. It's a terrible thing to live with," Hill said. "We have to close our windows at night because it stinks. It's crazy that it's still happening. It's 2023, and all this keeps going on. Hopefully, one day our prince will come, but until then it's taking a lot of Vitamin C."

[Study: Imperial Beach residents are breathing Tijuana sewage - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com)

Tijuana sewage isn't only in Imperial Beach waves. It's in the air. And San Diegans are breathing it.



On Wednesday, high winds whip throughout San Diego County including in Imperial Beach. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

UC San Diego researchers found that bacteria from raw sewage in the waters off Imperial Beach are becoming airborne, posing a potential health risk

BY JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH MARCH 2, 2023 7 AM PT

Sewage pollution spilling over the border from Tijuana into the San Diego region not only threatens the health of surfers and swimmers but potentially those simply breathing the air.

That's according to a [study](#) from UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography published Thursday in the journal *Environmental Sciences & Technology*, which found sewage-linked bacteria in sea-spray aerosols at Imperial Beach.

"Once pollutants become airborne that just means so many more people can be exposed to those pollutants," said Kim Prather, principal investigator on the study and director of the Center for Aerosol Impacts on Chemistry of the Environment at Scripps. "It extends well beyond just people going to the beach or getting in the water."

The potential health impacts are still unknown, cautioned researchers. Studies are ongoing and could eventually include an epidemiological investigation.

Prather said her team plans to start swabbing lifeguards, surfers and others to gauge the extent of respiratory exposure. Researchers also hope to scrutinize hospital records and monitor indoor air quality.

"The bottom line is we don't know what the effect is yet of inhaling this cocktail that comes out of the ocean," she said, adding: "This is tip of the iceberg. We're trying to keep everybody calm."

The study took place following rain events in early 2019, with researchers taking air and water samples along the Tijuana River, Imperial Beach Pier and Scripps Pier in La Jolla. Using DNA sequencing, the team linked up to 76 percent of the airborne bacteria in Imperial Beach to the heavily polluted river.



Near Smuggler's Gulch at the U.S.-Mexico border, a high volume of water crosses Monument Road Wednesday, where eventually it will spill into the ocean near Imperial Beach. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

There is a well-established body of research that has found microorganisms transfer from the ocean to the atmosphere, but this is the first study to link airborne bacteria to a known source of sewage, said co-author Robert Knight, a professor of pediatrics, computer science and engineering at UC San Diego.

“It was a complete shock to find how much of microbes in the air were traceable back to sewage,” he said. “We had no idea that effect would be so strong.

“Now that we know this is a real phenomenon,” he added, “we need to find out what are the impacts to human health.”

About \$1.5 million has been secured by Rep. Scott Peters in this year's omnibus spending bill for Prather and her team to further investigate the public health ramifications of airborne pollutants and potential pathogens, officials said.

Beaches as far north as Coronado were closed due to sewage pollution from Mexico at a record pace in 2022. Imperial Beach, for example, had signs warning of sewage contamination posted along its beaches on 249 days last year. The Tijuana Sloughs, a once-coveted surfing spot located at the mouth of the river, hasn't been open since December 2021.

Swimming in sewage-tainted waters can expose beachgoers to dangerous bacteria and viruses, according to county public health officials. Those who ignore the restrictions could be at risk of diarrhea, fever, respiratory disease and infections.

Water polluted with sewage, compared to the typical urban runoff that follows rainstorms, carries a much higher risk of pathogens, such as E. Coli, norovirus and salmonella, officials said.

February 2023

[Tijuana sewage gushes through border canyon in San Diego after recent pipe break - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com)

Tijuana sewage pours through San Diego border canyons after recent pipe break



A water contamination sign warns beach goers about high bacteria in the water in Imperial Beach on February 15, 2023. A pipeline break south of Tijuana last week has triggered an ongoing sewage spill along the border, as a pump station spews up to 50 million gallons a day of raw effluent, according to federal officials. Beaches are closed as far north as the Silver Strand. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Federal officials say pipeline repairs in Mexico could take another week.
Beaches as far north as the Silver Strand remain closed due to sewage pollution.

BY JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH FEB. 15, 2023 3 PM PT

Millions of gallons of raw sewage from Mexico are gushing into San Diego through two canyons along the border, according to federal officials. The spill is coming from at least two pump stations that were forced to shut down after a construction crew last week inadvertently ruptured a major pipeline south of Tijuana.

Shorelines as far north as the Silver Strand were closed due to sewage contamination as of Wednesday, with the rest of the region's coastline under the standard 72-hour rain advisory. South Bay beaches have been repeatedly shuttered as the result of winter storms that washed polluted flows through the Tijuana River watershed.

"I've said it 1,000 times, but I'll keep saying it until it's fixed: It's an environmental injustice," said Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre, who has made cleaning up pollution from Tijuana her top priority.

The recent spill, which started last Friday, is concentrated in Goat Canyon and Smugglers Gulch, where concrete capture basins are helping to redirect some of the flow to the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant along the border in San Diego, officials said.

The wastewater facility, which typically treats about 25 million gallons of sewage a day, has been processing an additional roughly 10 million gallons daily from Tijuana to limit the spill's impacts, officials said.

"We can sustain this, but it is adding wear and tear on our plant," said Morgan Rogers, area operations manager in San Diego for the U.S. section of the International Boundary and Water Commission.

Federal officials estimate that it will take at least another week to repair the broken pipe, which carries effluent to a crumbling wastewater treatment plant located about 6 miles south of the border at a place called Punta Bandera.

However, just repairing the pipe won't completely address pollution linked to the aging facility. The San Antonio de los Buenos treatment plant near Tijuana discharges about 35 million gallons a day of raw sewage into the Pacific Ocean, according to estimates from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

That discharge frequently floats up the coast, shuttering beaches even during summer months. The governor of Baja California, Marina del Pilar Ávila, has pledged to fix or replace the plant by 2025.

Meanwhile, EPA has a wide-ranging \$630 million plan to address the sewage pollution pouring over the border from Tijuana. The blueprint, which has about \$300 million in funding, prioritizes an expansion of the International Wastewater Treatment Plant in San Diego. Officials have said projects could break ground in the next three years.

The agency has cautioned that no amount of spending will completely stop the flood of urban runoff triggered by heavy rains. In fact, these flows, as polluted as they are, help maintain the estuary in Imperial Beach. The wetlands would degrade over time without the infusion of freshwater.

Reports of Tijuana sewage leaking over the border into the San Diego region stretch back at least to the 1930s. While significant improvements were made in the 1990s, the city's plumbing still isn't keeping pace with population growth.

Real-time beach conditions are posted at sdbeachinfo.com.

[Tijuana sewage blasted San Diego beaches at record pace in 2022 - The San Diego Union-Tribune \(sandiegouniontribune.com\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com)

Tijuana sewage blasted San Diego's South Bay beaches at record place in 2022. What will this summer bring?



Signs warning of potential sewage pollution were posted on July 2, 2022, the Saturday of the Fourth of July weekend, in Coronado. The Hotel del Coronado can be seen in the distance. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Imperial Beach and Coronado suffered the highest number of beach closures in more than a decade last year, including through tourist season. ‘Warning’ days added to the pain.

BY JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH FEB. 25, 2023 6 AM PT

Sewage spilling over the border from Tijuana has plagued South Bay shorelines for decades. Ominous yellow and red signs warning of “contaminated water” are frequently posted in the sand from Imperial Beach to Coronado.

However, concerns reached a fevered pitch last year after public health officials rolled out a sensitive new DNA-based protocol for testing water quality. A tidal wave of swimming restrictions and warnings followed, stretching through tourist season.

As Tijuana’s plumbing has continued to crumble, beach closures across the South Bay last year soared to

their highest total in more than a decade, according to data from the San Diego County Department of Environmental Health and Quality.

Coronado, frequently named among the nation’s top beach destinations, was plagued by sewage on 51 days, more than double its previous high in 2019.

Heavy rains and repeated mechanical failures in Mexico have kept shorelines shuttered for the beginning of 2023. San Diego leaders are now bracing for what could be another brutal summer.

“I am absolutely appalled by the crisis of sewage contaminating our oceans, poisoning our environment and threatening beachgoers,” said county Supervisor Terra Lawson- Remer, whose district includes Coronado.



A beach closure sign warns of sewage pollution in Imperial Beach on Feb. 15, 2023. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Beaches are only closed when bacteria levels exceed state thresholds for public safety and there is a “known sewage spill,” according to county health officials. What’s more common across Southern California is the standard yellow and white “advisory” signs posted 72 hours after a heavy rain.

What changed last year was the addition of “warning” signs, posted when bacteria levels spike and ocean

currents are moving north from Mexico, but sewage cannot be plainly seen or smelled. The blue and red placards read: “Warning! Beach water may contain sewage and may cause illness.”

The new warning protocol, which gives beachgoers discretion over whether to get in the water, was instituted by the county over the Fourth of July weekend after city officials complained about repeated closures.

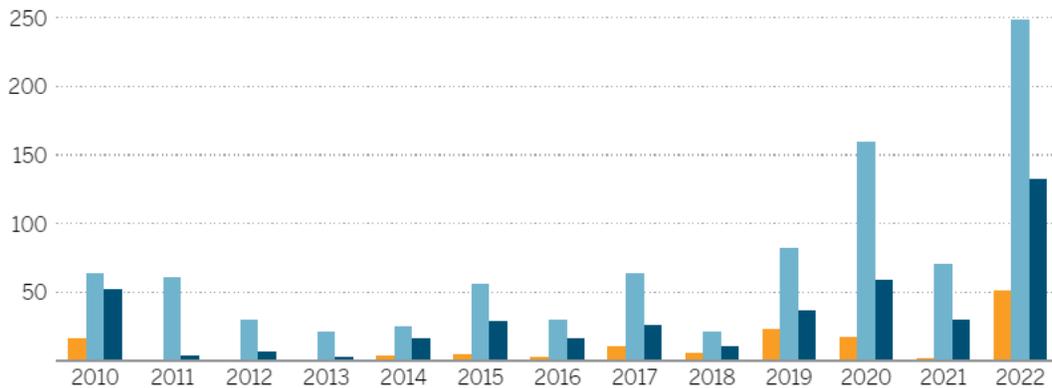
In total, signage alerting people to sewage contamination was posted last year on 133 days along the Silver Strand and a whopping 249 days in Imperial Beach. In Coronado, 44 of the 51 days that the city’s shoreline was marred by sewage signage were during spring and summer months.

The Tijuana Sloughs, a once coveted surfing spot located at the mouth of the river, hasn’t been open since December 2021.

Sewage pollutes South Bay beaches at record pace

The number of days when beach signs restricting ocean access were posted due to elevated bacteria levels linked to Tijuana sewage spills have increased sharply in recent years, particularly in 2022. That’s when San Diego County rolled out a new DNA-based water quality testing system to more accurately gauge threats to public health, and new warning signs were added to the mix.

■ Coronado shoreline ■ Imperial Beach shoreline ■ Silver Strand Shoreline



2022 includes days when not just closure but warning signs were posted. The county started using the blue warning placards last year in the South Bay when bacterial levels exceeded the threshold for public health but sewage couldn’t be seen or smelled in the ocean.

Source: San Diego County Department of Environmental Health and Quality
Michelle Gilchrist & Karthika Namboothri / The San Diego Union-Tribune

Bummer Summer

Local officials have been shocked by the sizable number of closure and warning days that came with sunny skies and clear weather, when people from around the world flock to places such as the Hotel del Coronado.

The iconic establishment, where rooms can run upwards of \$1,000 a night, declined to comment for this story, other than to say its business “has not been significantly impacted by the closures.”

Still, numerous tourists who visited the area last summer told the Union-Tribune they’d think twice about booking another trip to the otherwise posh city.

Youth programs also suffered. The Cal State Games Jr. Lifeguard competition in Coronado was canceled because of the warning signs, as was the city’s annual Fourth of July Rough Water Swim.

YMCA Camp Surf just north of Imperial Beach got hit especially hard. Enrollment was reportedly down as parents voiced concerns about the lack of ocean access. While individual swimmers have discretion over whether to get in the water, many business aren’t willing to risk the liability when signs are posted.

This year, YMCA’s popular summer program is hoping for the best but preparing for the worst, said Jamie Cosson, executive director of overnight camps.

“We’re getting a plan together right now to shuttle kids to beaches farther north if we have the closures,” he said. “We have a great facility, a great team. Now we just need to get kids to the ocean.”

The broken wastewater plant

The main culprit behind the summertime pollution is believed to be a defunct wastewater facility along the coast in Mexico at a place called Punta Bandera. Federal officials estimate the San Antonio de Los Buenos treatment plant, about 6 miles south of the border, is spewing as much as 35 million gallons of raw sewage a day into the Pacific Ocean.

“This whole conversation wouldn’t be happening if we didn’t have the ongoing effluent from Punta Bandera,” said Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre.

“Coronado is now getting to experience what we’ve been experiencing for a long time, unfortunately,” she added. “I feel for both our communities.”



Sewage spills into the ocean from the San Antonio de Los Buenos wastewater treatment plant about 6 miles south of the border in Mexico. (Alejandro Tamayo/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The closures and warnings are necessary to protect beachgoers from dangerously high levels of bacteria and viruses, according to county public health officials. Swimmers who ignore the restrictions could be at risk of diarrhea, fever, respiratory disease, meningitis and even paralysis.

Water polluted with sewage, compared to the typical urban runoff that follows rainstorms, carries a much higher risk of dangerous pathogens, such as E. Coli, norovirus and salmonella, officials said.

Not everyone's concerned. Many people surf and swim at South Bay beaches even when closure signs are posted.

Coronado Mayor Richard Bailey has questioned whether his city's beaches are any more polluted than in past years or if the threshold for a bacterial exceedance under the new DNA testing has been set unnecessarily low.

"Our main concern in Coronado is the simple question, 'Is the water safe or not?'" he said. "Coronado's objective is to make sure the policies in place around warnings and closures align directly with the actual water quality."

He has repeatedly pointed out that last year beaches were closed even when the traditional culture method — in which scientists examine water samples for bacterial growth in a lab — was meeting state health standards for bacteria.

Falk Feddersen, a professor of oceanography at UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, who has worked with the county on identifying sources of sewage coming from Mexico, has agreed that the test could use some fine-tuning.

So far, public health officials haven't been willing to entertain that idea. San Diego is the first coastal county in the nation to institute a federally approved water-quality test using the DNA technology. The process was a decade in the making, including state and federal approvals and a peer-reviewed study.

There's some hope for the future, though. Significant upgrades to wastewater facilities in Mexico are expected to kick off this year. More than \$470 million has been slated for such work under a deal struck last year between Mexico and the United States.

That includes a suite of repairs to major pipelines, pumps and other facilities in Tijuana. The construction of a new wastewater treatment plant at Punta Bandera is expected by 2025. The U.S. has also agreed to double the capacity of its South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, which services Mexico, by 2027.

Reports of sewage leaking over the border into the San Diego region stretch back at least to the 1930s. Significant improvements were made in the 1990s, but Tijuana's wastewater facilities haven't kept pace with growth while many poorer communities remain unconnected to the city's sewer system.

Real-time beach conditions are posted at sdbeachinfo.com.