



CITY OF IMPERIAL BEACH

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

PALOMA AGUIRRE, MAYOR

825 IMPERIAL BEACH BLVD., IMPERIAL BEACH, CA 91932

TEL: 619.423.8303 | FAX: 619.628.1395

September 24, 2024

Jeff Zients
Chief of Staff
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Zients,

I am writing to urgently request that President Biden declare a federal state of emergency to address the escalating environmental and public health crisis caused by the pollution from the Tijuana River. As the Mayor of Imperial Beach, I am witnessing firsthand the devastating impacts of this unchecked transboundary contamination on the health and safety of our residents. The situation has reached a tipping point, and without immediate federal intervention, the consequences for our community will only worsen.

The Tijuana River is consistently discharging up to 80 million gallons per day of untreated sewage, industrial waste, and urban runoff, exposing the residents of Imperial Beach and neighboring communities to high levels of toxic chemicals, pathogens, and harmful gases. Recent research conducted by UC San Diego and San Diego State University paints a deeply concerning picture: levels of hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) regularly exceed safe limits during nighttime hours. This gas, combined with volatile organic compounds (VOCs), is polluting both the air and ocean water, causing a dangerous increase in respiratory and gastrointestinal symptoms among residents.

This crisis is not just a matter of environmental degradation; it is a severe public health emergency. The contamination is exposing people to antibiotic-resistant pathogens, including strains of *E. coli* and *Legionella*, which pose significant health risks. These bacteria have been found in the Tijuana River Estuary and are likely airborne, reaching homes, schools, and workplaces. The situation is compounded by the presence of viruses such as Hepatitis B and C, making the water a hazardous threat to everyone who lives and works in this area.

What makes this situation particularly dire is that the affected populations are already vulnerable. Imperial Beach and nearby communities like San Ysidro are home to low-income, working-class residents who face additional challenges accessing healthcare and safeguarding their families from these environmental dangers. The impact on public health is magnified by these socioeconomic



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factors, creating an environmental injustice that demands immediate attention.

Furthermore, the crisis is exacerbated by climate change, with extreme weather events like Tropical Storm Hilary further damaging already deteriorating infrastructure and increasing the frequency of sewage overflows. These events, combined with the persistent cross-border sewage flows, have led to continuous beach closures and a collapse of our tourism-dependent economy. Businesses are suffering, property values are declining, and the region's future is increasingly uncertain.

Given the severity of the public health risks and the inadequacy of state and local resources to fully address this crisis, I strongly urge you to act now. A federal state of emergency would unlock critical funding and resources to:

1. Implement immediate public health measures: Deploy air filtration systems to the approximate 65,000 affected households, provide medical evaluations, and offer real-time air and water quality monitoring. This will help reduce exposure to harmful gases like hydrogen sulfide and VOCs, as well as mitigate the spread of dangerous pathogens.
2. Prioritize the Tijuana River diversion project: The most urgent infrastructure project needed is the diversion of the Tijuana River, which will prevent further contamination from flowing into U.S. waters. Diplomatic strategies with Mexico alone are not enough to address this crisis, and the International Wastewater Treatment Plant, while useful, does not solve the core problem. We need immediate infrastructure solutions on the U.S. side to divert and treat the polluted water before it causes more harm.
3. Designate the Tijuana River Valley as a Superfund site: This designation would provide the legal framework and federal funding required for a comprehensive cleanup of the river and surrounding areas. A Superfund designation would allow for the long-term remediation necessary to address not only sewage but also industrial and chemical waste that is bioaccumulating in the region.

This is a moment for decisive action. Imperial Beach cannot continue to suffer from decades of inaction. The health and well-being of our residents, especially children, the elderly, and outdoor workers, are at risk every day this pollution continues. This is not just an environmental issue; it is a preventable public health disaster. I implore you to act swiftly and decisively, and I trust that your leadership, proven in times of crisis, will prioritize the safety of our communities and the restoration of our environment.



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Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. I look forward to your prompt response and would welcome the opportunity to provide any additional information or discuss the immediate steps needed to protect the health and future of Imperial Beach.

Sincerely,

Paloma Aguirre
Mayor, City of Imperial Beach
E-mail: paloma.aguirre@imperialbeachca.gov