

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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November 17, 2023

The Honorable Anthony Blinken
The Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We, the appointed members of the California Coastal Commission (Commission), write today to respectfully request your urgent assistance in addressing an ongoing and worsening public health and environmental crisis in southern California. The crisis is caused by raw sewage, industrial waste, garbage, and other pollution flowing across the border from Mexico into southern California – so called “contaminated transboundary flows,” a problem exacerbated by damage that occurred this past summer due to Hurricane Hilary. This situation is negatively affecting border security and military personnel, impairing water and air quality, sickening tens of thousands of U.S. citizens, closing beaches and businesses in San Diego County, and damaging critical estuarine and marine habitat in the United States.¹

Due to its unique role and authority, the U.S. Department of State’s International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) can do more to resolve this crisis than any other state, federal or local government agency. The IBWC constructed and operates the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (ITP) in California’s southern San Diego County and is a critical part of an infrastructure system designed to collect and treat sewage and wastewater originating from Tijuana, Mexico. Unfortunately, years of chronic shortfalls in operations and maintenance funding for the plant have left it vulnerable and allowed its treatment capacity to be overwhelmed by recent increases in the volume of pollution flowing into it. We urgently ask that you help provide IBWC with the funding and support needed to expand the capacity of the ITP and associated infrastructure. We further request that you help ensure that existing and future funding is used as expeditiously as possible to complete the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement Mitigation of Contaminated Transboundary Flows Project, and that secure and consistent operations and maintenance funding be provided to help ensure that the elements of the project remain functional and able to be quickly repaired when necessary.

Although the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement resulted in the allocation of \$300 million towards transboundary flows mitigation projects in recent years, construction has still not begun, and cost estimates have grown significantly. IBWC Commissioner Maria-Elena Giner recently informed us that the current funding need now exceeds \$900 million – in addition to \$32 million to repair damage caused by Hurricane Hilary and build capacity to withstand severe weather in the future.

¹ For more detailed information on the crisis, please review the informational briefing on the issue held by the Commission last month in the city of Imperial Beach: https://cal-span.org/meeting/ccc_20231011/

The people of California desperately need your help to secure the additional necessary funding and to expedite construction efforts on the ITP and other associated infrastructure. As a Commission charged with protecting California's world-famous coast and ocean and the public's right to access and enjoy it, this coastal community pollution crisis poses an almost existential threat. It comprises the most severe, long-standing, and far-reaching impacts to California's coast that many of us have encountered during our time as Commissioners. Despite significant effort and expenditure by the State of California and local governments, transboundary pollution has overwhelmed our communities and environment. The scale and range of its impacts are accelerating over time and are intensifying due to climatic conditions. There are also significant economic consequences and national security implications. Communities that are largely dependent on coastal tourism to support hotel and hospitality jobs are seeing 40-50% decreases in business across the region due to beach closures. In-water Navy trainings and activities have been relocated, rescheduled, and canceled due to poor water quality and U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection personnel routinely suffer from infections and gastro-intestinal illnesses. Over the past several months, the Commission has heard emotional and factual testimony from local, state, and federal government officials, land managers, environmental justice groups, business owners, physicians, non-profit organizations, and members of the public on the impacts of the crisis and the immediate need for the ITP to be upgraded and expanded along with a suite of additional pollution collection and treatment projects. The situation poses a dire emergency in need of immediate federal assistance and financial resources to facilitate an expedited response.

We therefore write to echo Governor Gavin Newsom, Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis, and our fellow federal, state, and local political leaders in California and Congress who have identified this problem as an environmental and public health crisis needing significant and immediate federal attention and resources. Thank you for your consideration of our urgent request for additional resources to IBWC to fund and put the ITP's repair and expansion construction on the fastest possible trajectory to completion.

Signed on behalf of the California Coastal Commission,



DONNE BROWNSEY
Chair