

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

455 MARKET STREET, SUITE 228
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94105-2219
VOICE (415) 904-5200



October 27, 2023

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker of the House
Speaker's Office
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
H-232 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Chairwoman
House Appropriations Committee
H-307
United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee
H-307
United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Johnson, Leader Jeffries, Chairman Granger, and Ranking Member DeLauro:

As Chair of the California Coastal Commission (Commission), I write today to respectfully request that you include \$310 million in the emergency supplemental bill for essential upgrades and expansion of the federally operated South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (SBIWTP). This \$310 million is included in the President's supplemental funding request. The funding is desperately needed to help address the severe crisis of raw sewage, industrial waste, garbage, and other pollution flowing across the border from Mexico into Southern California, a problem exacerbated by damage due to Hurricane Hilary. This crisis is negatively affecting border security and military personnel, impairing water and air quality, sickening tens of thousands of U.S. citizens, shuttering beaches and businesses in San Diego County, and damaging critical estuarine and marine habitat in the United States.¹

The Commission is charged with protecting the state's coast and ocean while protecting the public's access to these resources. This coastal community pollution crisis is the most severe, long-standing, and far-reaching that I have encountered during my time with the Commission. Despite significant effort and expenditure by the State of California and local governments, the 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. Over the past several months, Commissioners and I have heard emotional and factual

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/

testimony from local, state, and federal government officials, land managers, environmental justice groups, physicians, non-profit organizations, and members of the public on the impacts of the crisis and the immediate need for the SBIWTP 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.

The U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission, the agency within the U.S. State Department that operates the SBIWTP, has documented 100 billion gallons of toxic effluent entering the U.S. through the Tijuana River since 2018, and over 35 billion gallons since December 2022. After Hurricane Hilary two months ago, more than 2 billion gallons of untreated sewage flowed through the area over one weekend.

There are beaches in southern San Diego County that have been closed for close to 700 consecutive days due to the unsafe levels of pollutants in the water. The Tijuana Estuary is the largest intact coastal wetland in Southern California, a biodiversity hotspot, and is designated as an Estuary of International Significance. The pollution is causing significant habitat loss due to sedimentation, lack of tidal exchange, and low oxygen levels that are impacting fish, shellfish, and other wildlife across the Estuary. The communities of Imperial Beach and Coronado also offer the nearest and often most affordable beach and ocean access for many of San Diego's underserved and disadvantaged communities. However, their beaches have been closed extensively for two summers in a row due to dangerous contamination. These communities are also largely dependent on coastal tourism to support hotel and hospitality jobs. Some businesses have seen a 40-50% decrease across the region due to beach closures. Untreated wastewater and sewage are also posing substantial health risks to residents and recreational beach users who are getting sick from bacteria-laden water and airborne particles. This environmental disaster has further implications for national security impacts related to military and border protection operations and to the health of U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection personnel who work and train along this coastline, routinely come into contact with polluted water and suffer numerous infections and gastro-intestinal illnesses.

On behalf of the Commission, I applaud President Biden's recent inclusion of the \$310 million in his emergency supplemental funding request. I also want to acknowledge and support the efforts of Governor Gavin Newsom, Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis, and our federal, state, and local political leaders in California who have identified this problem as an environmental and public health crisis needing significant and immediate federal attention and resources. I respectfully request that you include this \$310 million in the supplemental funding package. Without this funding, these communities, our military, and coastal resources will continue to suffer. I hope you will view this as a national priority in order for the work with our federal partners to proceed to rehabilitate and remediate these waste treatment systems.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Donne Brownsey".

Donne Brownsey
Chair, California Coastal Commission

cc: Senator Alex Padilla
Senator Laphonza Butler
Representative Scott Peters
Representative Juan Vargas
Representative Mike Levin
Representative Sara Jacobs
Gavin Newsom, Governor of California
Eleni Kounalakis, Lt. Governor of California
Wade Crowfoot, California Natural Resources Secretary
Yana Garcia, Secretary for Environmental Protection, CalEPA
President pro tempore Toni Atkins, California State Senate
Speaker Robert Rivas, California State Assembly