

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

November 13, 2023

CORRESPONDENCE

**Received between
November 3 and November 13, 2023**

[Table of Contents](#)

[Letters from Groups and Organizations](#) - page 2

[Individual Emails](#) - page 6

Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

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November 13, 2023

CORRESPONDENCE

**Letters from Elected individuals and
Organizations**

November 9, 2023

The Honorable CA Coastal Commission Chair Brownsey

Subject: Environmental Justice Request for Action on the Tijuana River Transboundary Pollution Crisis from Youth and Local Organizations

Dear Chair Brownsey and Coastal Commissioners,

As members in a growing coalition of nearly 50 nonprofit and community-based organizations representing residents, workers, activists, and businesses in San Diego County who advocate for and with children, youth, and their families, we want to thank you for your leadership in considering actions related to addressing the transboundary pollution crisis at the upcoming November 15th California Coastal Commission (the Commission) meeting. At the October Commission meeting, many organizations represented here shared alarming data and lived experiences resulting from the impact that the transboundary pollution crisis is having on us, our families, our organizations, and South San Diego County communities. We extend our gratitude to the Commission for taking the time to visit the Tijuana River Valley to understand the root causes and proposed solutions to the crisis. We heard many Commissioners, as well as other state leaders, including Lieutenant Governor Kounalakis, speak with passion about California's opportunity to do more to address the urgency of the situation.

We are grateful for the continued discussion at the November meeting and now urge you to consider the following actions:

1. **Send letters to Governor Newsom and President Biden requesting a federal emergency declaration**, which would enable the coordination and allocation of critical resources to address this ongoing environmental catastrophe. The same level of urgency, funding, and comprehensive action that is applied to other national emergencies, whether natural or human-made, must be extended to the pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. The letter should also clearly acknowledge that this community will not experience abatement of the impacts until the solution is fully funded; which the International Boundary and Water Commission has recently publicly stated will require \$900 million. Ad hoc funding is not leading to permanent solutions on this issue as the cost of maintenance continues to rise over time. The current outlook for fully funding this project includes \$350 million of federally allocated money, as well as an active \$310 million supplemental budget request at the federal level. Even if this supplemental bill request is funded, there will still be an approximately \$240 million funding gap. We urge the Commission to make clear that this gap must be closed immediately before costs continue to rise and that a continuous source of funding for operations and maintenance of the International Treatment Plant is imperative for the solution to be successful.
2. **Establish a Working Group within the Coastal Commission to see Commission actions through and champion this issue at the state and national capitals**, and/or consider publicly committing Commissioners to participate in existing inter-agency working groups such as the Sentinel Landscape Working Group. Participation in a working group will increase information sharing at the Commission and also build accountability amongst individual commissioners. While there may be reasons to coordinate in a less structured manner, this is an issue worthy of transparency. The people of South County have long been told that their leaders are "working on

this issue,” but the catastrophe has only gotten worse. We urge the Commission to consider the need for transparent, consistent updates and accountability.

3. **Request epidemiological data resulting from pollution impacts on local communities be tracked and consolidated by the California Department of Health, San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency, and other relevant bodies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.** A comprehensive study focused on gathering epidemiological data is needed to better understand the breadth and depth of public health impacts on affected communities. Now that pollution has also been found to be [diminishing air quality](#), the radius of impact likely extends far beyond Imperial Beach. It remains unclear how many people are being impacted and how long South County communities will have to endure these toxic conditions in their home.
4. **Build upon recent research gathered by the County of San Diego and request ongoing data on the impacts to local businesses and community-based organizations resulting from the lack of coastal access.** The County of San Diego recently conducted a study on the economic impacts to businesses resulting from transboundary pollution. An early analysis tells a grave story of over 70% of businesses being negatively impacted, as well as loss of revenue, staff layoffs, damage to property tax income, and a huge blow to the entire tourism industry that will take years to recover. Businesses have been forced to close and many residents have lost their livelihood. This information helps us to know who is impacted and how best to respond. More information is now needed on the impacts of the loss of coastal access on community-based organizations to understand the real cost of border pollution on California communities. Some long standing organizations are losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in contracts and are forced to close outdoor education programs that have provided defining experiences to children, youth, and families for decades. These programs instill water safety knowledge, establish lifelong connections to nature, and inform lasting community bonds and identities. While the true value of these programs on individuals is immeasurable, it is vitally important to gain a better understanding of how each program’s budget, management, enrollment, and future prospects are affected by border pollution if there is any hope for their survival.
5. **Immediately waive permit requirements for non-profits facilitating coastal access elsewhere in San Diego County because they are unable to operate at beaches with water quality closures/advisories.** Summer is a time of year when many of our organizations facilitate opportunities for safe recreation, critical skill development, and positive youth development in the ocean for thousands of children and youth. Beach closures and advisories resulting from transboundary pollution in South County beaches now hinder many programs, putting new cumbersome considerations into operations, including expense and risk of transportation. Extreme pollution in the Tijuana River Watershed is so toxic that many volunteers used to wear protective gear to conduct cleanups and now volunteerism in these areas has ceased because of frequent illness. Local organizations have had to adapt or cancel programs in response to the health hazards caused by the pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. While adapting or pivoting programs to new locations not impacted by water quality closures, organizations are confronted with another layer of bureaucracy that local coastal land managers impose on access in the form of restrictive permits and fees. For many programs this is a burden that organizational resources can not overcome. The consequence is that many young people, especially those in South County communities, are missing out on critical experiences.

Conclusion

Considering the overwhelming community interest and support for our state government to weigh in on this issue, and the worsening harm to local economies, health, and coastal access caused by transboundary pollution, we ask for your support of the above actions. All residents, especially children and youth, should have repeated, meaningful, safe access to the outdoors to help improve physical and mental health outcomes, promote self-confidence in new experiences, and foster a love and understanding for the environment. Lack of access to safe outdoor spaces, especially for communities that identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, is a reason for the critical mission-driven work that we do. The Imperial Beach shoreline, located in South San Diego County, is tragically recognized as the most polluted stretch of sandy beach in the entire country. With nearly 700 consecutive days of beach closures due to the ongoing influx of sewage, industrial discharges, and trash from the Tijuana River, the communities of South San Diego County are bearing the brunt of this environmental disaster. Pollution in the Tijuana River remains one of the most egregious environmental justice issues in California.

We urgently appeal to the California Coastal Commission and the State of California to fulfill commitments to support Environmental Justice communities and take decisive action to address the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River.

On behalf of nearly 50 nonprofit and community-based organizations we appreciate your consideration of our requests.

Respectfully,

Surfrider Foundation San Diego County Chapter
Outdoor Outreach
YMCA of San Diego County



**OUTDOOR
OUTREACH**



CC: Honorable CA Coastal Commissioners

Chair Brownsey

Vice Chair Dr. Hart

Commissioner Bochco

Commissioner Turnbull-Sander

Commissioner Notthoff

Commissioner Escalante

Commissioner Wilson

Commissioner Rice

Commissioner Aguirre

Commissioner Harmon

Commissioner Uranga

Commissioner Cummings

Natural Resources Agency Secretary Wade Crowfoot

Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis

Secretary Toks Omishakin

Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

ED
November 13,,2023

CORRESPONDENCE

Individual Emails

Dover, Joanna@Coastal

From: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 13, 2023 11:09 AM
To: Teufel, Cassidy@Coastal
Subject: FW: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

Vanessa Miller

California Coastal Commission
455 Market Street, Ste. 300
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-904-5201

From: Edward Spriggs <ejspriggs@yahoo.com>
Sent: Friday, November 10, 2023 3:11 PM
To: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Subject: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

Dear Commissioners,

This message is from Ed Spriggs, former 12-year Imperial Beach City Council Member, 4-year member of the Commission-Local Government SLR Working Group and current member of the IBWC Citizens Forum Board. My main point here in summary is that the Commission can and must do more in support of quicker and more comprehensive solutions that end the cross border pollution flows than is reflected in the correspondence attached to this item.

You have received reports and heard testimony that establish the fact that cross border pollution is a major threat to public health, wildlife resources, and coastal access along the southern portion of the San Diego coastline from at least the City of Coronado in the north to the border with Mexico, including the Tijuana River Estuary. Airborne/aerosolized pollution extends the significant but still unquantified health risks identified by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and others well beyond the coastal zone. Yet the coastal zone is where the aerosolization occurs and likely has its most detrimental health effects. Needless to say, the beaches mentioned are closed more days than they are open, making access impossible for tens of thousands of South Bay, Coronado and San Diego residents

These facts call for more urgency and urgent action than is reflected in your correspondence with the International Boundary and Water Commission. I urge you to set aside staff resources and perhaps create a subcommittee to recommend to the Commission within the next several months quicker and more comprehensive solutions that California and the federal governments of the US and Mexico should undertake to bring an end to these polluted flows as soon as possible. It may be that special "notwithstanding" emergency legislation is needed or that specific actions on the Mexico side are needed (which can be taken more quickly in their less regulated environment). Whatever improved approaches you come up with will be better than the current pace and funding uncertainty, neither of which auger well for our health and well being or the fulfillment of your primary coastal protection mission.

I understand as well as any member of the public that you have many priorities and challenges. But given how many of your constituents are so very adversely affected by this problem, you need to move this to the top of your priority list. The Commission has the mandate, the staff and legal resources to come up with more comprehensive and timely solutions/recommendations than have been proposed by the IBWC and EPA bureaucracies. Please take this on as a top priority.

Respectfully,
Ed Spriggs
Imperial Beach Councilmember (2010-22)

Dover, Joanna@Coastal

From: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 13, 2023 11:11 AM
To: Teufel, Cassidy@Coastal
Subject: FW: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

Vanessa Miller

California Coastal Commission
455 Market Street, Ste. 300
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-904-5201

From: Pat Flowers <protutor619@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, November 10, 2023 12:09 PM
To: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Subject: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

Hello,

I am a resident of Imperial Beach. The pollution along the border from the transboundary flow from Mexico has become unbearable for our community not only for the health risks, but the damage it does to our local economy.

We have been pleading for action for years. Now we are not just requesting, but are demanding an immediate solution by calling on President Biden to declare a federal environmental emergency in order to finally get this done. Thank you.

Patricia Flowers

Dover, Joanna@Coastal

From: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 13, 2023 11:12 AM
To: Teufel, Cassidy@Coastal
Subject: FW: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

Vanessa Miller

California Coastal Commission
455 Market Street, Ste. 300
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-904-5201

From: Gary Brown <grbrown1946@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, November 10, 2023 7:58 AM
To: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Cc: Gary Brown <grbrown1946@gmail.com>
Subject: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update

Commissioners,

I appreciate the work your staff has done to draft letters to Governor Newsom, President Biden, and Secretary Blinken. But the letters' tone does not convey adequately the urgency of the situation, and the recommended actions do not encompass a comprehensive solution. The situation demands approximately \$1B in funding to support urgent, immediate actions, not an incremental, business-as-usual approach.

IBWC's written response to your questions proves that treating the problem in a customary manner isn't a timely solution. Where else in the United States would EPA allow raw sewage to threaten the health, economies, and environment of a region for generations? The solution needs to be managed as if lives depended upon it because they do.

Please seek a more compelling, swift and timely resolution. Bring to bear all necessary resources of the federal and state governments. Seek an Emergency Declaration.

Gary Brown
1222 Delaware Street
Imperial Beach, CA 91932

Dover, Joanna@Coastal

From: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 13, 2023 11:09 AM
To: Teufel, Cassidy@Coastal
Subject: FW: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update SUPPORT

Vanessa Miller

California Coastal Commission
455 Market Street, Ste. 300
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-904-5201

From: Sandra Brillhart <sandy.brillhart@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, November 10, 2023 4:07 PM
To: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Subject: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6e - Tijuana River Pollution Crisis Update SUPPORT

Honorable Commissioners:

Thank you for coming to Imperial Beach last month to see for yourselves the transboundary sewage flows and contamination that have created environmental and health crises in the Tijuana River Valley. We are grateful for your interest and for your willingness to use the powers of the Coastal Commission to request

urgent action from the Federal and State government in providing us with the resources that are needed to remedy the situation.

Please vote to approve the letters to President Biden, Secretary Blinken and Governor Newsom describing the severity of the situation and strongly requesting their immediate assistance to fund the comprehensive solutions that have been identified to address it.

Respectfully,

Sandra Brillhart
186 Elm Avenue
Imperial Beach, CA 91932.

Dover, Joanna@Coastal

From: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 13, 2023 11:11 AM
To: Teufel, Cassidy@Coastal
Subject: FW: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6a - Executive Director's Report

Vanessa Miller
California Coastal Commission
455 Market Street, Ste. 300
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-904-5201

-----Original Message-----

From: Patti Boman <bomanpatti@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, November 10, 2023 1:00 PM
To: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Subject: Public Comment on November 2023 Agenda Item Wednesday 6a - Executive Director's Report

We live in IB and we haven't been able to even put our feet in the ocean and every time we take the dog to the beach, just walking the sand she gets eye and paw infections, so we don't take her anymore and we walk with shoes on. We are in need of help before we get sick. Homes will lose value. We need to declare a state of emergency now. Thank you.

Patti Boman

Dover, Joanna@Coastal

From: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 13, 2023 11:11 AM
To: Teufel, Cassidy@Coastal
Subject: FW: Border pollution

Vanessa Miller

California Coastal Commission
455 Market Street, Ste. 300
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-904-5201

From: Pat Escher <patescher@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, November 10, 2023 10:25 AM
To: ExecutiveStaff@Coastal <ExecutiveStaff@coastal.ca.gov>
Subject: Border pollution

Commissioners:

I write to echo the views so ably expressed by Gary Brown, a resident of Imperial Beach, in his email sent to you today. "Where else in the United States would EPA allow raw sewage to threaten the health, economies, and environment of a region for generations? The solution needs to be managed as if lives depended upon it because they do." The pollution problem generally, and the South Bay Treatment Plant specifically, have been neglected and mismanaged by the IBWC for decades. An incremental solution is no solution at all for the people who live here today. I urge you to use your voice to impress upon the administration the urgency of NOW. The people of San Diego County deserve no less.

Sincerely,
Pat Escher
420 J Avenue
Coronado, CA 92118