

**Tijuana River Valley Briefing Sheet – 4/18/2025**

As an environmental champion and the state-designated trustee for beach and submerged lands in Imperial Beach, the San Diego Unified Port District (Port) is committed to working cooperatively with its federal, state, regional, and local partners to participate in and support various efforts to address water and air quality in the Tijuana River Valley and nearby coastal waters, as well as health and safety of our local communities. Over the past decade, the Port and other local agencies have forged a strong partnership with federal agencies to develop comprehensive solutions for the ongoing binational pollution crisis. This briefing sheet provides updates on current federal, state, and regional level activities related to the Tijuana River Valley.

**Federal Efforts**

- The [USIBWC-USEPA June 2023 Joint Record of Decision \(ROD\) for the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement \(USMCA\) Mitigation of Contaminated Transboundary Flows Project](#) identified projects in the US and Mexico to reduce sewage in canyon flows, discharged directly to the Pacific Ocean at San Antonio de los Buenos Creek in Punta Banderas, Mexico, and wastewater in the Tijuana River. The ROD is what enables USEPA and US International Boundary Water Commission (USIBWC) to proceed to the design phase for proposed projects.
- Several of the projects in the ROD are the same as, or similar to, those included in Minute 328, a binational agreement that includes project responsibilities, such as operation and maintenance (O&M) and cost sharing. USIBWC has a publicly accessible [GIS web portal](#) to view the location, description, and status of projects included in Minute 328. Border Infrastructure Repairs and Improvements updates include:
  - The expansion of South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (SBIWTP) from 25 to 50 million gallons per day (MGD) is the only U.S.-side project of the Minute 328 projects planned for 2022-2027. USIBWC anticipates design for the SBIWTP rehabilitation and expansion project to be completed by May 2026. The maximum timeline for construction is five years.
  - San Antonio de los Buenos (SAB) treatment plant: Eighteen MGD of sewage will be treated by the new SAB treatment plant prior to being discharged directly to the ocean six miles south of the border in Punta Banderas, Mexico. Testing, corrective actions, and stabilization efforts are currently underway, with full operation now expected to commence in early May (not in April as previously identified).
  - Tijuana's International Collector: In early March, the USIBWC reported that multiple unforeseen construction issues at the project to replace Tijuana's International Collector resulted in a temporary cessation of influent to the SBIWTP on March 9<sup>th</sup>, as well as transboundary flows of wastewater and

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rainwater that entered the Tijuana River at Stewart's Drain. By mid-afternoon on March 9, 2025, the transboundary flows had stopped, and the SBIWTP resumed normal operations. On April 9, 2025, USIBWC was notified by Mexico they had decided, that after deliberating various options, to discharge approximately 5 MGD for a five-day period. This discharge will occur while they repair a critical junction box that is part of the International Collector project. The USIBWC has requested Mexico take action to activate its PBCILA lift station to remove as much flow as possible from the river before it enters the United States, given the new wastewater discharge. This pump is normally closed during the rainy season.

Mexico is also currently planning for Phase II of the repair project which is expected to last about eight days. During Phase II, there will be no influent flow from the International Collector to USIBWC's ITP and there will be a bypass in place so the flows that would normally go through the Collector to the ITP will be pumped to the SAB treatment plant and discharged to the ocean. The repair to the Collector is anticipated to be completed by the end of April 2025.

- "Sanchez Taboada" collector: The collapse of a 36-inch collector in Tijuana, "Sanchez Taboada," in mid-March resulted in the release of approximately 3.4 million gallons a day (MGD) of wastewater. Tijuana's State Public Utilities Commission (CESPT) is repairing the collector and expects the repairs to be complete by the end of April. In the meantime, nearly half of the flow from the collector is being diverted and pumped using pumps loaned by USIBWC into an intact segment of the Tijuana sewage collection system, which reduces the flow reaching the Tijuana River.
- The Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas pump station (PBCILA) has not been in operation since January 26, 2025 due to high flows in the Tijuana River during January and February storm events and following the storm events. Mexico is waiting on repairs to equipment (i.e., front loader equipment) to be able to remove sediment and turn PBCILA back on. Therefore, transboundary flows are reaching the Tijuana River Valley, Tijuana River Estuary, and Pacific Ocean. USIBWC flow gauge data for the Tijuana River is available on the [USIBWC Water Data Portal](#).
- On-going operation and maintenance of the SBIWTP infrastructure will require long term federal funding while river diversion, trash boom, and other supplemental projects identified in the Comprehensive Infrastructure Solution remain unfunded. The Port continues to advocate for the additional funding needed to fully implement the Comprehensive Infrastructure Solution, including support for the following legislation.

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- *Water Resources Development Act*: The *Water Resources Development Act* (WRDA) was signed and authorized into law. One of the key priorities of the Act is to allocate \$200 million to help address water infrastructure needs and assist the region's response to sewage pollution in the Tijuana River Valley. Currently, WRDA related funds have not been appropriated.
- USIBWC's Annual Construction Budget for Maintenance Needs:
  - In 2024, Congress appropriated \$156 million as a part of the 2024 appropriations bill to USIBWC's construction budget for maintenance needs. Of that amount, \$103 million was directed at SBIWTP in the Tijuana River Valley. However, there has been no ongoing funding source appropriated to maintain operations of the SBIWTP.
  - On March 15, 2025, the Full-Year Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025 ([H.R. 1968](#)) was signed by President Trump. This Continuing Resolution (CR) provides continuing appropriations to fund the government at the current FY 2024 funding levels through September 30, 2025. The CR included a reduction of the USIBWC's construction budget for FY 2025 from \$156 million to \$78 million.
- [H.R. 10545](#) included \$250 million in construction funds to the USIBWC. The \$600 million in total investments to date meets USIBWC's funding needs for rehabilitation and expansion of SBIWTP. The total investment amount includes the initial \$300 million approved in July 2020 under the first Trump Administration.
- On March 6, 2025, Representative Scott Peters [introduced legislation](#) to authorize the USIBWC to accept funding from federal and non-federal entities for wastewater treatment, flood control projects, or other water conservation efforts. Currently, the USIBWC is almost solely reliant upon annual appropriations from Congress or emergency funding to build and maintain its facilities.
- In response to an October 24, 2024, petition from local elected officials, USEPA conducted a preliminary evaluation of the Lower Tijuana River Valley for eligibility to be added to the National Priorities List (NPL) under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), also known as Superfund. On January 3, USEPA responded that further evaluation of the Tijuana River Valley as a Superfund site was not warranted, in part, because contaminants detected in water and sediment samples do not exceed USEPA's screening levels for protection of human health. On March 14, 2025, USEPA reaffirmed its decision not to review the Tijuana River Estuary for Superfund designation, citing ongoing wastewater treatment projects and a lack of immediate human health risks.

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### State Efforts

- The State of California has been a partner to the region in mitigating issues beyond the federal purview.
- San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board (San Diego Water Board) – [US-Mexico Border Water Quality](#) efforts:
  - Status of SBIWTP Compliance: Since November 2024, USIBWC's SBIWTP has been in compliance with secondary treatment effluent standards. However, the San Diego Water Board has stated additional Notice of Violations may be issued to USIBWC if they are unable to attain compliance with the NPDES Permit for alleged violations related to late report submissions, inadequate maintenance, and unauthorized discharges of waste.
  - Tijuana River Valley Monitoring Program (TRVMP) Work Plan: The TRVMP, which is a requirement of USIBWC's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit, is designed to characterize transboundary flows and their pollutants. The San Diego Water Board reviewed the TRVMP Work Plan and deemed it complete. USIBWC is scheduled to begin monitoring in April, starting with sediment monitoring. USIBWC is required to provide quarterly update reports and will provide information at future San Diego Water Board meetings.
  - On January 24, 2025, the San Diego Water Board sent a letter the USIBWC regarding the September 23, 2024 through October 29, 2024 Smuggler's Gulch Canyon Collector (Canyon Collector) transboundary flow and spill event and USIBWC's 2022 Settlement Agreement obligations. The letter served to highlight certain obligations the San Diego Water Board believes are not being met and identified improvements needed in USIBWC's inspections, reporting efforts, and response plan. On February 18, 2025 the San Diego Water Board issued Investigative Order No. R9-2025-0022 to USIBWC. The Investigative Order requires USIBWC to submit technical information related to discharges of waste from multi-day Spill Events at the Hollister Street Pump Station and at the Goat Canyon and Smuggler's Gulch canyon collectors. USIBWC took the Canyon Collector offline due to excessive sediment flows from a construction site immediately upstream at Matadero Canyon in Tijuana, Mexico. According to San Diego Water Board staff at the April 9, 2025 Board meeting, the sediment has been removed from the Smugglers Gulch and Goat Canyon collectors and both collectors are in good working order. USIBWC is trying to work with Mexico to limit or prevent similar damage to the canyon collectors in the future.

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- On March 13, 2025 the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) formally accepted the [Lower Tijuana River Indicator Bacteria and Trash Advance Restoration Plan \(ARP\)](#). USEPA acknowledges that the ARP fulfills California's obligation under the Clean Water Act's 303(d) Program to develop a plan to restore water quality in the lower Tijuana River.
- Senate Bill 170 Projects (funded through CA State Water Board's Division of Financial Assistance): These projects were originally proposed in the 2012 Tijuana River Valley Recovery Strategy: Living with the Water and refined and analyzed in the [2020 Tijuana River Needs and Opportunities Assessment \(NOA\) Report](#).
  - Tijuana River Trash Boom: This \$4.7 million pilot project was funded by the State Water Resources Control Board as a pilot project to gather information for a more permanent solution in accordance with Project J in the June 2023 USIBWC-USEPA Joint Record of Decision. The trash boom system was deployed in the Tijuana River Flood Control Channel immediately downstream of the international border. Non-profits Alter Terra and Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC), have reported that the trash boom is functioning as expected.
  - Smuggler's Gulch Dredging Project (\$4.25 million – County of San Diego): The Smuggler's Gulch dredging project involved the removal of approximately 30,000 cubic yards of accumulated sediment, trash, and debris in Smuggler's Gulch and the Tijuana River Pilot Channel. In March 2024, the County of San Diego initiated trash and sediment removal activities, which was completed in late 2024. This dredging is necessary prior to installation of permanent sediment and trash capture infrastructure at Smuggler's Gulch, which will be funded by a separate grant.
  - Tijuana River Valley Hydrology and Habitat Restoration (\$2 million – County of San Diego): The Tijuana River Valley hydrology and habitat restoration project will remediate a contaminated seven-acre property adjacent to the Tijuana River and restore it to native upland coastal sage scrub habitat. Demolition of on-site structures, soil preparation, irrigation installation, and planting are complete. Habitat restoration is underway with successful natural recruitment and minimal non-native plant species present.
- [SB 867 \(Border Rivers\)](#) and [Proposition 4](#): *SB 867 Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024* included \$50 million allocated to address water quality problems in the California-Mexico cross-border rivers and coastal waters, including the Tijuana River Valley Watershed. The Port submitted a letter of support for SB 867 in July 2024. SB 867 was signed into law last year. Proposition 4, which was approved by California voters in November 2024,

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authorized the state to issue the funds as identified in SB 867. Funding will start in Fiscal Year 26.

- [SB 10 Otay Mesa Toll Facility Act](#): SB 10, authored by Senator Steve Padilla, would authorize a portion of the toll revenues from State Route 11 (that will connect Otay Mesa East Border Crossing with the 905 and 125) to be allocated to in the maintenance of the USIBWC's SBIWTP and the development of additional sanitation infrastructure projects related to the Tijuana River pursuant to an agreement with the federal government. The bill would require the repayment of bond obligations to take priority over other allocations of toll revenues. The bill is scheduled to be heard March 25, 2025 at 1:30 pm by the Senate Transportation Committee. The Port submitted a letter of support for SB 10, but with emphasis that the revenue should go towards supporting State and regional projects beyond federal purview.

## Regional Efforts

- As part of the regional coalition, the Port has advocated for the USIBWC to comply with secondary treatment effluent standards<sup>1</sup>, participated in the development of the USMCA Mitigation of Contaminated Transboundary Flows Project (also known as the Comprehensive Infrastructure Solution), and supported efforts to obtain funding to complete the projects and identify ongoing funding sources to maintain operations of the SBIWTP so the infrastructure can continue to function as intended for years to come. The Port supported local and state efforts that led to the signing of [H.R. 10545](#) which included \$250 million in construction funds to the USIBWC.
- On April 3, 2024, the Board of Port Commissioners (Board) adopted a proclamation of a local emergency for Tijuana River Valley transboundary pollution crisis in solidarity with our regional partners. Since then, the Board has continued the declaration due to the on-going presence of transboundary flows and beach closures that are beyond the control of local resources, requiring substantial efforts and resources of the federal and state government. The Board will continue the declaration at their May 6, 2025 meeting.
- The Port is a member of the Tijuana River Valley Recovery Team Steering Committee, led by the San Diego Water Board. At a meeting on March 19, 2025, the Team discussed potential projects eligible for funding through Proposition 4, which passed in November 2024. In addition, the Team discussed a request for the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) to review the findings of the

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<sup>1</sup> Order No. R9-2021-0001 as amended by Order No. R9-2023-0009, National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System No. CA0108928, Waste Discharge Requirements for the United States Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant Discharge to the Pacific Ocean Through the South Bay Ocean Outfall (NPDES Permit)



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October 2024 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and County of San Diego Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER).

- **Water Quality and Beach Closures:** The beaches from Border Field State Park to Imperial Beach have been closed continuously for over three years (since December 8, 2021) due to the risk from pathogens in the sewage in the transboundary flows. The water quality impacts come from many sources including sewage released six miles south of the border in Punta Bandera, aging infrastructure in Tijuana and SBIWTP, and wastewater directly discharging into the Tijuana River. Recent water quality related activities:
  - Dr. Falk Fedderson and Dr. Sarah Giddings at Scripps Institute of Oceanography are currently developing a Pathogen Forecast Model (PFM) to predict the presence of harmful pathogens in Tijuana River Valley and Imperial Beach coastline. The Scripps researchers previously developed a physical model showing how ocean and estuary currents and contaminated wastewater are transported along the coast.
  - USEPA recently awarded \$100K to San Diego State University (SDSU) researchers to continue to monitor and assess the percentage of wastewater flowing in the river valley by analyzing for tryptophan and other analytes as surrogates to sewage. This information will be used in the development of a predictive model. [Preliminary results of the Tijuana River Valley Healthy Water, Healthy Air Study are now available.](#)
- **Air quality in the Tijuana River Valley** has been severely impacted and has been the focus of various agencies and local groups. Concerns have increased about the health risks facing South Bay residents exposed to the aerosolization of sewage and other pollutants, resulting in strong odors emanating from the river and increased reports of illnesses as indicated through health data collection efforts.
  - *Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER):* The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the County of San Diego completed a survey in October 2024 to help public health and emergency response leaders learn more about health concerns and impacts from pollution in the Tijuana River Valley. The CASPER results can be found on the [South Region Health Concerns CDC Health Survey webpage.](#)
  - *Assessment for Chemical Exposures (ACE):* The County of San Diego in partnership with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) surveyed people online from October 21 through November 22, 2024, to learn more about the health concerns and impacts so public health and emergency response leaders can assess impacts of the pollution, direct public health response, target outreach to prevent similar incidents, assess the need

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- to modify emergency response procedures, and identify a group of exposed people that may be followed for long-term effects.
- ***“Healthy Water, Healthy Air” Community Survey:*** In October 2024, researchers at the SDSU School of Public Health initiated a survey to identify health issues linked to environmental conditions in the Tijuana River region. A Tijuana River Public Health Forum was held on March 27, 2025. The forum included updates on new environmental and public health data and research and allowed the public to hear from experts at SDSU’s School of Public Health, UCSD’s School of Medicine, physicians, and community health leaders. The researchers are still seeking additional participants for the “Healthy Water, Healthy Air” Community Survey. Survey participants must be 18 years or older and live or work in one of the following areas: Imperial Beach, San Ysidro, South Chula Vista, National City, Coronado, Otay Mesa, or other nearby south San Diego areas. Concurrently, SDSU researchers are currently following a cohort of the survey participants over an extended period and are seeking funding to extend the study over several years. Visit <https://tjriver.sdsu.edu/> for more information and resources.
  - Dr. Kim Prather (Scripps) is conducting research on the aerosolization of bacteria and chemical compounds such as hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) within the Tijuana River Valley due to the transboundary pollution flowing into Tijuana River to help assess how coastal communities are exposed to coastal water pollution even without entering polluted waters.
  - San Diego Air Pollution Control District (SDAPCD) is conducting air quality monitoring efforts, including six sensors installed throughout the Tijuana River Valley to measure the levels of the compounds emitted into the air such as H<sub>2</sub>S. The Port collaborated with SDAPCD by installing an air quality sensor near the Imperial Beach Pier in August 2024 for a 2-3 year period.
  - The San Diego Air Pollution Control District (APCD) and the County of San Diego continue their efforts to distribute 10,000 air purifiers to residents in the affected communities through the APCD’s [Air Improvement Relief Effort \(A.I.R.E.\) Program](#).