



CITY OF CORONADO  
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
RICHARD BAILEY

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June 29, 2023

Chair Brenda Mallory  
The White House Council on Environmental Quality  
730 Jackson Place NW

Washington, D.C. 20503

**Re: Request to Support Tijuana Infrastructure Repairs in the Ocean Justice Strategy**

Dear Chair Mallory:

I have the great privilege of serving as the Mayor of the City of Coronado, California. On behalf of the City, I am writing to express concern about the severe, ongoing public health emergency in the San Diego region caused by failing wastewater infrastructure in Tijuana, Mexico.

The White House Council on Environmental Quality (“CEQ”) recently announced a request for comment on a proposed environmental justice strategy for the nation’s Oceans. (88 Fed. Reg. 37518 (June 8, 2023).) Specifically, CEQ has asked for comment on “[w]hat injustices related to the ocean should the Federal Government better address?”

In response to your question, we ask that the Biden Administration make halting the public health emergency occurring in the Pacific Ocean in south San Diego County the Administration’s highest priority.

As you may be aware,<sup>1</sup> contaminated water flows from Tijuana into the Pacific Ocean, causing severe health risks for individuals and families visiting beaches in southern San Diego County. People who use the ocean are getting ill, in some cases very seriously, and it is not just those who fail to heed adequate warning. United States Navy Seals and BUDs use the ocean for training and have reported illnesses. United States Customs and Border Protection service members are routinely exposed to highly polluted effluent in the Tijuana River Valley. All of this presents a public health emergency that the Federal Government has an obligation to solve with all possible expedience.

At its core, this is an issue of environmental justice. Coronado’s beaches (along with those of neighboring Imperial beach) provide the closest and most affordable ocean access for many of San Diego’s Disadvantaged Communities (“DACs”). Indeed, large swaths of South San Diego, and portions of National City, Chula Vista and Imperial Beach qualify as DACs. Coronado and

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<sup>1</sup> Please see attached letter from Representatives Scott Peters, Juan Vargas, Mike Levin, Sara Jacobs and Daryl Issa to President Biden, requesting a Declaration of a State of Emergency for the Tijuana River Valley; and letter from Representatives Scott Peters, Juan Vargas, Mike Levin, Sara Jacobs to Baja California Governor, Marina del Pilar Avila, requesting interim measures to reduce cross border sewage flows.

Imperial Beach are the closest beaches and provide the easiest access for these communities. Parking is free, and there is wide, open access to the shoreline. The ocean also provides a source of food for residents and visitors alike who harvest fish and shellfish from our beaches. This source of food can be invaluable for those with fixed or limited incomes. So while Coronado itself is not a DAC, it is the beach for many DACs in the San Diego region.

Those beaches also provide the basis for an economy and jobs. According to a recent study by the San Diego Association of Governments (“SANDAG”) Coronado hosts almost 4500 jobs in the retail, food service and hotel/accommodation sectors.<sup>2</sup> These are jobs for waiters, hotel clerks, maids and other service sector employees. Most of the employees live in San Diego, National City, Chula Vista and Imperial Beach – the same location of the above mentioned DACs.<sup>3</sup> Their jobs are put at risk if the City’s beaches are consistently closed because there will be fewer visitors to utilize their services.

The City is dedicated to maintaining clean beaches and a healthy environment, which is why we have consistently worked with our Congressional Representatives and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) to advocate for greater federal funding and faster implementation of solutions.

To their credit, through bi-partisan efforts, our Congressional delegation was able to mandate \$300 million in funding to support new infrastructure in the Tijuana River Valley as part of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (“USMCA”). Mexico subsequently committed \$140 million for infrastructure improvements on its side of the border.

EPA has worked diligently with the International Boundary Water Commission (“IBWC”) to fund a series of projects that should ultimately solve the problem in what we are being told is 2027 or 2028. The City greatly appreciates EPA’s efforts and values the time and energy the agency has spent working on this issue. However, nothing is being done to stem the flow of sewage in the interim. Worse, we recently learned that there is an immediate deficit of \$150 million in project funding caused by deferred maintenance on the International Wastewater Treatment Plant in the Tijuana River Valley (the “ITP”).<sup>4</sup> We also recently learned that the proposed budget for IBWC in FY 24 is \$6 million less than FY 23, and worse, it is \$13 million less for construction of new projects. This is untenable given the backlog of maintenance costs faced by the agency and the need for new projects to address cross border pollution.

This is a problem that is multi-agency and bi-national in nature and that is in need of White House engagement and leadership. The Biden Administration can take several actions today, that would help alleviate this situation:

- Request from Congress and/or allocate from existing programs, all funds necessary to construct, operate and maintain all projects necessary to stop sewage flowing north from Mexico.

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<sup>2</sup> SANDAG, *Employment in the San Diego Region: City of Coronado* (2019) last visited June 26, 2023 <https://www.sandag.org/-/media/SANDAG/Documents/PDF/data-and-research/socioeconomics/estimates-and-forecasts/employment-in-san-diego-region-city-of-coronado-2019-08-01.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See *Id.*, at 4.

<sup>4</sup> *San Diego’s efforts to plug Tijuana sewage suffer \$150M setback*, San Diego Union Tribune (June 25, 2023) last visited June 26, 2023 <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/environment/story/2023-06-23/san-diego-federal-plant-treating-tijuana-sewage-needs-repairs>

- Ensure that EPA's planned infrastructure in the Tijuana River Valley is constructed on the fastest possible timeline, and make this the Administration's top environmental priority.
- Direct EPA and IBWC to develop and implement interim solutions to reduce sewage flows between now and the date of completion of the main projects.
- Ensure that EPA and the IBWC are fully funded and have the staff necessary to implement all projects on the fastest possible timeline.
- Ensure that the budget requests for IBWC and EPA include all costs related to operations, management and maintenance of existing and future infrastructure, including in situations where IBWC is relying on an outside vendor for operations and management.
- Engage with Mexico's government at the state and federal level to ensure they are maintaining infrastructure in Mexico; to verify the financial commitment and timeline for reconstructing the San Antonio de las Buenas treatment plant in Mexico; and to ensure that the plant is completed on schedule.

Implementing these measures will help alleviate the crisis facing the South San Diego communities. The City of Coronado thanks you for leading the Ocean Justice Strategy for a healthier ocean environment. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your staff on these important initiatives.

Sincerely,



Richard Bailey  
Mayor  
City of Coronado

cc:

Mayor John McCann  
City of Chula Vista

Mayor Paloma Aguirre  
City of Imperial Beach

Mayor Ron Morrison  
City of National City

Mayor Todd Gloria  
City of San Diego

Supervisor Terra Lawson Remer  
Board of Supervisors  
County of San Diego

Supervisor Nora Vargas  
Board of Supervisors  
County of San Diego

City Council  
City of Coronado

Tina Friend  
City Manager  
City of Coronado

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 28, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States of America  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

We strongly urge you to declare a Federal State of Emergency for the Tijuana River Valley. The influx of sewage, trash, and industrial waste from the Tijuana River – flowing across the U.S.-Mexico border and into San Diego County – have contributed to some of the most polluted beach areas in the country. The surge in toxic pollution has severely impacted San Diego County's economy and environment and is a serious health hazard for the Navy sailors who train in our waters.

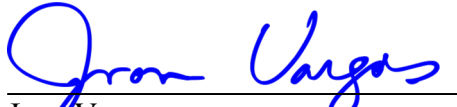
The Tijuana River has remained one of the most pressing environmental issues in our region. Despite a decades-long discussion, more progress has yet to be made to permanently address these ongoing problems. Our communities have faced the brunt of the Tijuana River's ecological effects. In 2017, the Environmental Protection Agency attributed over 34,000 illnesses to water quality pollution. Researchers continue to monitor its heightening impact on local air quality, coastal water pollution, and levels of chemicals and pathogens.

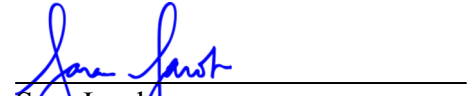
Due to these health concerns, the Cities of San Diego and Imperial Beach have maintained an ongoing State of Local Emergency. These local emergencies accompany the County of San Diego's Public Health Crisis declaration. Unfortunately, the resources of our state and local governments have not sufficiently protected impacted communities. And while we are proud to have secured \$300 million for the International Boundary and Water Commission via the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement and the FY23 Appropriations bill, we know that more is required for a long-term solution to this crisis. We respectfully request a Federal Emergency Declaration to create a multi-agency response to address this matter and open avenues for additional federal funding. This isn't simply a request, but a necessity.


The ongoing disaster of the Tijuana River warrants the same federal resources and attention as any other natural and environmental disaster. Left unaddressed, a pollution crisis of this scale will continue to wreak havoc on our region. We cannot afford to wait months, or even years, as the environmental and economic integrity of the Tijuana River Valley fades away. Enclosed is a letter the Mayor of Imperial Beach sent to the White House Council of Environmental Quality echoing the need for a Federal Emergency declaration.


As the delegation representing the San Diego region, we strongly urge you to continue uplifting your commitments to support environmental justice communities and take action to address the ongoing crisis in the Tijuana River.


Sincerely,

  
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Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress

  
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Sara Jacobs  
Member of Congress

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Scott H. Peters  
Member of Congress

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Mike Levin  
Member of Congress

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Darrell Issa  
Member of Congress

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 21, 2023

The Honorable Marina del Pilar Avila  
Governor, Baja California  
Secretaría de la Gubernatura (Oficina del Gobernador)  
Edificio Poder Ejecutivo 3er. Piso  
Calzada Independencia #994  
Centro Cívico y Comercial  
Mexicali, B.C.  
C.P. 21000

Dear Governor del Pilar Avila:

We write to thank you and the Mexican federal government for the \$144-million commitment to sanitation infrastructure projects in Tijuana, Baja California as outlined in IBWC Minute No. 328. This investment will make a critical dent in the wastewater pollution currently plaguing the Tijuana River and River Valley, as well as the beaches in the border region. This wastewater pollution is badly hurting the communities we represent, and they are counting on the cooperation of our two governments to fix this environmental catastrophe.

To that end, we'd like to open lines of communication between our offices so we may be kept informed of the status of the Mexico-side projects. Our constituents are clamoring for an end to this crisis, and while we know that these investments will take some time to deploy, we respectfully request that your office keep us apprised of the progress being made so we can further assure the people of Imperial Beach, Coronado, and San Diego that relief is on the way. Specifically, we would like to know when you plan to break ground on a new treatment facility at San Antonio de los Buenos (SAB).

Currently, San Diego County beaches, particularly in the cities of Imperial Beach and Coronado, are closed and have been closed for years due to the untreated wastewater flowing into the Pacific Ocean from Punta Bandera and the Tijuana River. These beach closures are devastating to these communities which rely heavily on beach tourism to support their local economies. While we recognize that you are working hard to get a new plant built at SAB, we ask you to consider some immediate, short-term measures that might reduce the bacteria levels at our beaches.

The people we represent in San Diego County, particularly in Imperial Beach and Coronado, are extremely frustrated about their beaches being closed due to health hazards associated with untreated wastewater flowing up the coast. It has been suggested to us that, in the near term, dredging the existing settling ponds at SAB and adding chemical treatment and aerators could reduce bacterial levels enough to reduce our beach closure days. Is your government considering pursuing these approaches?

At the same time, we will continue to push our U.S. federal agencies to pursue upgrades for the International Treatment Plant underway as quickly as possible. This is an urgent priority for all of us.

Thank you for your continued commitment, partnership, and friendship. We look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,



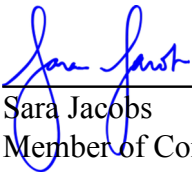
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Scott H. Peters  
Member of Congress



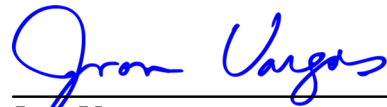
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Mike Levin  
Member of Congress



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Sara Jacobs  
Member of Congress



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Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress