

The County of San Diego is in a state of emergency (Gov. Code § 8558) due to continued conditions for detrimental impacts to the environment, and economy, caused by persistent impacts from cross-border sewage pollution and sewage impacted ocean waters.

Environmental

- The International Boundaries and Water Commission (IBWC) documented over 100 billion gallons of effluent since 2018. Recently, IBWC reports approximately an additional 99.91 billion gallons crossing the international border from December 28, 2022, through January 2, 2026.
- Heavy rainfall in 2023 and 2024 resulted in increased wastewater discharges, wastewater infrastructure failures, and increased runoff and flows from the Tijuana River, creating sewage impacts to South County beaches. For comparison, IBWC reported that Tropical Storm Hilary resulted in a peak flow of 1.8 billion gallons in the Tijuana River on August 21, 2023, and the early 2024 storms resulted in a peak flow of 58 billion gallons in the Tijuana River on February 7, 2024. From January 1, 2023, through January 2, 2026, the southern coastal area of San Diego County received 37.56 inches of rainfall (annual average rainfall in this area is around 10 inches).
- The January 22, 2024, storm event resulted in significant amounts of trash and debris accumulation within the Tijuana River between the international boundary and Dairy Mart Road bridge. On May 22, 2024, IBWC reported completion of the cleanup effort resulting in 1,130 tons of debris removal from the site.
- United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) and Record of Decision released June 9, 2023, which states, "These transboundary flows, which enter the U.S. via the Tijuana River and its tributaries and across the maritime boundary, impact public health and the environment and have been linked to beach closures in southern San Diego County."
- US EPA PEIS documents the environmental impact to the region, specifically from water quality and public health to the beaches. It identifies the impacts to the marine and estuarine ecosystems and agricultural resources. It states that eliminating or dramatically reducing the pollution would strongly benefit water quality and public health at beaches in the City of Imperial Beach, Silver Strand State Beach, and the City of Coronado.
- According to the US EPA PEIS, approximately 28 million gallons per day of untreated wastewater are discharged directly into the Pacific Ocean at San Antonio de los Buenos Creek at Punta Bandera. Per the EPA PEIS and study conducted by Scripps Institution of Oceanography, indicate that transboundary maritime flows of untreated wastewater discharged via San Antonio de los Buenos Creek at Punta Bandera pose a substantial health risk to swimmers at beaches in southern San Diego County during the dry (tourist) season (Feddersen et al., 2021).
- Excess sediment originating from transboundary flows can reduce or block flows at the mouth of the Tijuana River Estuary, resulting in injury or mortality to aquatic species that are unable to move between the Estuary and the Pacific Ocean.
- The San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) has released a draft California Environmental Quality Act environmental checklist for the Tijuana River Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) for indicator bacteria and trash in April 2019. In this checklist, it identifies human health, and ecosystem impacts in the Tijuana River Valley. Consistent with the 2014/2016 Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 303(d) List of Water Quality Limited Segments (303(d) List), indicator bacteria and trash are listed as pollutants in the lower Tijuana River watershed.

The data showing the high levels of these pollutants prompted the RWQCB to develop TMDLs for the lower Tijuana River watershed.

- From December 8, 2021 through January 2, 2026, the most southern beach in the region, the TJ Slough, has been closed for 1,485 days due to the poor water quality. On October 12, 2025, the beach water closure for the Tijuana Slough Shoreline was temporarily lifted for one day but closed the very next day. The beach water closure has remained in effect since that day.
- Since January 1, 2023, to January 2, 2026, Imperial Beach locations have been impacted by sewage and under water contact closure for 988 of 1097 days, Silver Strand closed for 733 of 1097 days, and Coronado shoreline closed for 386 of 1097 days.
- Since May 5, 2022, the County of San Diego has been using the US EPA and California Department of Public Health approved advanced testing methodology, ddPCR, for water quality monitoring sampling to provide same-day data and the most accurate information available on bacteria levels in the water.
- Communities closest to the San Diego International Border, including the communities of Imperial Beach, San Ysidro, Otay Mesa, and Tijuana River Valley, are identified by SB 535 and identified on CalEnviroScreen 4.0 Environmental Justice communities as having high pollution burdens for impaired water bodies, unhealthy air quality levels, and elevated linguistic isolation and poverty rates.
- Beach tourism is a major economic contributor to south county communities.
- Numerous news reports have featured south county local business owners' testimony that recent sewage impacts, beach advisories and warnings, and beach closures are negatively impacting their economy, tourism in their community, and their business revenues/livelihoods.
- The pollution crisis and the related impacts to local businesses and the tourism industry has also impacted south bay schools. The South Bay Unified School District has seen a significant drop in enrollment compared to other neighboring school districts, which may lead to future school closures.
- County staff engaged with the affected municipalities, local business chambers, and the South County Economic Development Council to disseminate a Transboundary Pollution Economic Impact Survey to local businesses in south county. There were 63 respondents to the survey. The survey indicated that 74% of business respondents have been, and continue to be, negatively impacted by the transboundary pollution. 66% reported a decrease in revenue due to the pollution and recent water contact closures.
- Documented impact to government activities to United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP). US EPA PEIS references studies conducted by CBP and other agencies identifying high-level of fecal indicator bacteria (FIB) in areas where CBP works and could impact CBP agent health. Additionally, the PEIS states that "poor coastal water quality also contributes to the relocation, rescheduling, and cancellation of in-water Navy training and activities (Navy Region Southwest, 2022)."

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