



TERRA LAWSON-REMER

VICE-CHAIR

**SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: January 28, 2024

21

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**CONVENING A TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY POLLUTION SPECIAL MEETING
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

For decades, the Tijuana River valley pollution crisis has plagued the binational region of San Diego and Baja California, as rapid population growth and inadequate wastewater infrastructure have allowed untreated sewage and industrial runoff to flow across the border and into communities. This crisis is not just a South Bay issue but impacts communities across the entire San Diego region, jeopardizing access to clean water and clean air, while polluting our beaches and coastlines.

The County of San Diego has led on this issue, declaring a local state of emergency since June 2023, and taking aggressive action, including spearheading air quality and public health efforts with our regional, state, and federal partners, providing air purifiers for impacted residents, and working to address trash capture and flood risk in the river valley.

Thanks to the relentless efforts of local and congressional leaders, unprecedented progress has been made. In December 2024, the San Diego Congressional Delegation secured the final \$250 million in federal funding needed to complete the \$650 million repair and expansion of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, eventually doubling its capacity to treat 50 million gallons per day. This historic appropriation is the biggest investment in nearly three decades and a major step in the right direction, but the fight is still far from over.

While these investments mark a historic milestone, the challenges remain urgent. Persistent air quality issues, ongoing contamination, and ecological degradation continue to pose significant threats to the river valley, estuary, and coastal communities. Despite the progress made, these critical issues demand sustained and immediate action.

Now more than ever, we need coordinated efforts across local, state, federal, and international levels and a shared understanding of how agencies on both sides of the border are tackling

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different aspects of the problem. As the issue grows in regional significance, it is imperative that the County convene a special meeting to explore the problem in greater depth, highlight progress and solutions that are underway, and collaborate to generate new opportunities for action.

Our communities have long demanded transparency and accountability on efforts to resolve the Tijuana River pollution. The public deserves a clear and comprehensive understanding of the significant progress underway, the gaps that still need to be addressed, and the opportunities for further action. This convening can serve as a platform for fostering collaboration among a diverse range of stakeholders—community members, local and binational leaders, technical experts, and relevant agencies—while identifying innovative solutions to bridge these gaps and drive meaningful, lasting change.

On January 8, 2025, the County Board received a presentation from staff that identified programs and additional opportunities for state and federal partnership to address the Tijuana River valley pollution conditions that could be explored. The Board discussed the need to continue taking urgent action to stop the sewage, open our beaches, and address the health threats to our communities.

Today's item directs the County to coordinate a special meeting in Spring 2025. The special meeting would be structured as panels that cover different dimensions of the issue to highlight the interconnected nature of this work. These dimensions may include U.S. sewage and water infrastructure, Mexican sewage and water infrastructure, immediate health impacts, and long-term environmental remediation. Invited representatives from partner agencies would share presentations on their work, highlight progress being made, and answer questions.

By convening a special meeting with key stakeholders and agencies, the County can ensure progress is effectively communicated, on-going gaps are identified, and new opportunities for collaborative action can emerge to protect the health and welfare of our communities.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

VICE CHAIR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to coordinate a Tijuana River Valley Pollution special meeting in the Spring of 2025 with invited representatives from partnering agencies sharing presentations on their work, highlighting progress being made, and discussing gaps and opportunities for further action. County staff should provide a synopsis of meeting outcomes, including a summary of progress being made, identified gaps and challenges, and opportunities for continued collaborative action.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The Tijuana River pollution and contamination have disproportionately impacted communities that have been underserved and under-resourced, such as low-income communities and communities of color. It is imperative that the County take action to ensure that these individuals have solutions to improve and protect their local waterways, the surrounding land, and their air quality.

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SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

This board letter aligns with the County's sustainability goals by protecting the environment and fighting to eliminate hazardous substances, chemicals, and waste from our water sources and water bodies in San Diego.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funding for the requested action is included in the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Operational Plan based on existing staff time in the Department of Environmental Health and Quality, the Department of Public Works, the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs, the Office of County Counsel, and the Department of Public Health Services funded by General Purpose Revenue and other funding sources. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

The long-term impacts of the transboundary pollutants in the Tijuana River Valley area, subsequent beach closures and air quality issues have had a devastating impact on the surrounding communities up and down San Diego County's coast and near the border through decreased visitors and street traffic. It is imperative that the County convene stakeholders who are leading efforts toward infrastructure fixes needed to mitigate this binational issue.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

The Tijuana River valley pollution crisis is a defining issue for the San Diego region. Over the last five years, over 100 billion gallons of untreated sewage, industrial waste, and urban runoff have contaminated our beaches and coastlines, with cascading health, air quality, environmental, and economic impacts being felt throughout the region.

Thanks to the relentless efforts of local and congressional leaders, unprecedented progress has been made. In December 2024, the San Diego Congressional Delegation secured the final \$250 million in federal funding needed to complete the \$650 million repair and expansion of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, eventually doubling its capacity to treat 50 million gallons per day. This historic appropriation is the biggest investment in nearly three decades and a major step in the right direction, but the fight is still far from over.

Fixing the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant is essential, but it represents just one component of a complex, interconnected system with many moving parts on both sides of the border. For example, the Mexican military has accelerated construction of critical upgrades at the San Antonio de los Buenos Wastewater treatment plant, located six miles south of the border, and are slated to complete the work in 2025.

While these investments offer significant potential to improve future water quality and transboundary flows, particularly in the summer months, the reality on the ground today remains

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dire. Our communities are still confronted with ongoing and severe challenges, including poor air quality, degraded water quality, and persistent environmental contamination.

This complex issue requires sustained, coordinated efforts across local, state, federal, and international levels. While agencies on both sides of the border are tackling different aspects of the problem, the interconnected nature of the challenge demands a unified strategy.

Collaboration and a shared understanding of ongoing efforts across the region are essential to achieving lasting solutions. As the issue grows in regional significance, it is imperative that the County convene a special meeting to explore the problem in greater depth, highlight progress and solutions that are underway, and collaborate to generate new opportunities for action.

Today's item directs the County to coordinate a special meeting on the Tijuana River valley Pollution Crisis in the Spring of 2025. The special meeting would be structured as panels that cover different dimensions of the issue to highlight the interconnected nature of this work. Illustrative examples of the types of panels may include the following:

U.S. Sewage and Water Infrastructure: Focusing on recent accomplishments including major funding wins through congressional appropriations, upcoming plans and timelines for the expansion of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, as well as flood control and sediment capture infrastructure at the canyon collectors. Potential invited representatives may include entities such as, but not be limited to, the IBWC and members from the San Diego Congressional Delegation.

Mexican Sewage and Water Infrastructure: Focusing on upstream wastewater and stormwater infrastructure repairs and investments, including progress on San Antonio de los Buenos Wastewater Treatment Plan at Punta Bandera. Potential invited representatives may include entities such as, but not limited to: the IBWC, U.S EPA, and the other binational stakeholders as engaged through the Mexican Consulate.

Addressing Immediate Health and Environmental Impacts: Focusing on steps being taken and outstanding risks and gaps to mitigate immediate air and water quality impacts to San Diego communities. Potential invited representatives may include entities such as, but not limited to: the San Diego Air Quality Pollution District, Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry (ATSDR).

Addressing Long-Term Environmental Remediation: Focusing on long-term pollution and hazardous substance remediation in the river valley, including soil, groundwater, and surface water. Potential invited representatives may include entities such as, but not limited to: the U.S. EPA and the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

County staff would work to coordinate the special meeting, inviting representatives at partner agencies to this opportunity to share their work and collaborate on solutions, help ensure presentations are tailored to a broad public audience, and provide a comprehensive synopsis of the special meeting, including a summary of progress being made, gaps and risks identified, and areas of opportunity for further action.

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LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

This proposed action supports the Sustainability, Equity, and Justice Initiatives in the County of San Diego's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan by protecting local communities from contaminants and pollution in our waterways, the surrounding land, and our air. This action also aims to help reduce overall health disparities in our communities by working to improve San Diego's water and air quality.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Terra Lawson-Remer', with a stylized flourish at the end.

TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, Third District

ATTACHMENT(S)
N/A