



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Fifth District

DATE: September 30, 2025

03

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**RECEIVE UPDATE ON ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THE TIJUANA RIVER SEWAGE
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

The Tijuana River Valley (TJRV) and surrounding South Bay communities continue to suffer from impacts from untreated sewage, urban runoff and toxic gases in the air, resulting in recurring contamination of ocean waters and nearby neighborhoods. This crisis has a particular impact on the well-being of residents, the environment, and the economy of the cities and unincorporated communities of Imperial Beach, Chula Vista, National City, San Diego, Bonita, East Otay Mesa, and Coronado.

Under the leadership of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board), the County of San Diego (County), in partnership with stakeholders across the region, as well as at State and federal levels, are collaborating on innovative strategies to address this crisis. Recognizing the significant impacts to the environment, economy, and property within San Diego County caused by persistent cross-border sewage contamination and sewage-impacted ocean waters, the Board first issued a Proclamation of Emergency on June 27, 2023 (16). The Board has since continued the local emergency every 60 days, with the most recent action on September 10, 2025 (1).

On June 24, 2025 (10), the Board adopted a five point plan that directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to evaluate a set of programmatic options, identify priorities based on core County functions and potential public health impact, and return on September 30, 2025, with strategic recommendations and an implementation roadmap.

Subsequent to the June action, on September 9, 2025 (17), the Board additionally directed the CAO to implement an epidemiological public health impact study in affected communities and an economic impact study to assess the full scope of losses caused by the sewage crisis, including impacts on small businesses, property values, and regional tourism, to better inform future funding and mitigation efforts. In addition, on September 9, 2025 (18) the Board adopted a resolution requesting that the State Water Resources Control Board allocate Proposition 4 cross-border rivers funding to projects focused on addressing the ongoing environmental and public health crises in TJRV.

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Today's item requests the Board receive the directed update on ongoing efforts to strengthen the County's response to the Tijuana River sewage crisis through strategic recommendations outlined as part of this action. A roadmap for implementation will be further refined through the Ad Hoc Subcommittee.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

1. Receive this update on ongoing efforts to strengthen the County's response to the Tijuana River sewage crisis.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The Tijuana River sewage crisis disproportionately affects residents in South Bay communities, including Imperial Beach, Chula Vista, National City, Bonita, and East Otay Mesa. According to the Assessment of Chemical Exposures survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry in November 2024, nearly 65 percent of surveyed South Bay households reported physical health symptoms and a decline in quality of life linked to sewage contamination from the Tijuana River Valley. This underscores stark disparities in environmental health impacts within the region. These areas include neighborhoods with higher proportions of low-income households, and vulnerable populations who are more likely to experience adverse health effects from environmental contamination.

Various actions discussed as part of today's update are designed to prioritize interventions where health risks are highest. By focusing resources on these communities and improving access to health and environmental protections, the County of San Diego is committed to addressing the root causes of this crisis, reducing disparities in exposure, enhance public health outcomes, and promote equitable access to safe environments for all residents.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Today's proposed action supports the County of San Diego (County) Sustainability Goal #4 to protect the health and well-being of everyone in the region; Sustainability Goal #5 to protect water in all forms; and Sustainability Goal #6 to develop natural and organic land management policies that protect ecosystems, habitats, biodiversity, and soil health throughout the county while providing opportunities for all residents to access and enjoy the outdoors. These objectives will be advanced through coordinated efforts with local, State, and federal partners, with a focus on addressing the root causes, as well as ongoing impacts of the Tijuana River Valley sewage crisis on nearby communities. The proposed measures emphasize safeguarding public health, improving environmental conditions, and conserving natural resources so that current and future residents, as well as visitors, can continue to benefit from the County's diverse landscapes and ecosystems.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with today's recommendation. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years. There may be future fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations, which staff would return to the Board for consideration and approval.

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BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

The ongoing effects of the Tijuana River sewage crisis have impacted local commercial activity, reduced tourism, and created operational challenges for small businesses in coastal and border-adjacent communities. Allocating resources to address conditions in these areas supports efforts to stabilize economic activity, reduce business interruptions, and promote long-term economic resilience in affected communities.

The economic impact study discussed as part of today's update is anticipated to provide the Board and regional partners with a clear picture of the losses communities are facing and provide critical insights to guide relief efforts and long-term recovery planning.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

The Tijuana River Valley (TJRV) and surrounding South Bay communities continue to experience impacts from untreated sewage, industrial waste, and urban runoff, resulting in recurring contamination of coastal waters, beaches, and nearby neighborhoods. This crisis has a particular impact on the well-being of residents, the environment, and the economy of the cities and unincorporated communities of Imperial Beach, Chula Vista, National City, San Diego, Bonita, East Otay Mesa, and Coronado.

Under the leadership of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board), the County of San Diego (County), in partnership with stakeholders across the region as well as at State and federal levels, are collaborating to identify strategies to respond to this crisis. Recognizing the environmental, economic, and property impacts caused by persistent cross-border sewage contamination, the Board issued a Proclamation of Emergency on June 27, 2023 (16). The Board has periodically continued the Proclamation of Emergency, with the most recent action on September 10, 2025 (1). To strengthen a coordinated response and leveraging expertise from across the County enterprise, an Incident Command Structure was established on September 14, 2024, to organize County operations and response to the local emergency.

On June 24, 2025 (10), the Board established an ad hoc subcommittee entitled the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis, and directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to evaluate a set of programmatic options, identify priorities based on alignment with core County functions and potential public health impact, and return on September 30, 2025, with strategic recommendations and an implementation roadmap. Programmatic options under evaluation include:

- Establishing a County matching fund to support air filtration and HVAC upgrades in schools and childcare centers;
- Initiating an epidemiological health study on chronic hydrogen sulfide exposure;
- Creating a matching fund for infrastructure projects to remediate toxic hot spots along the Tijuana River, beginning with Saturn Boulevard;
- Conducting a comprehensive economic impact study of the sewage crisis; and
- Designating a County Sewage Crisis Chief to coordinate emergency response, funding, and interagency collaboration.

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Subsequent to the June action, on September 9, 2025 (17), the Board additionally directed the CAO to implement both an epidemiological study to assess health impacts in affected communities and an economic impact study to evaluate losses to small businesses, property values, and tourism caused by the sewage crisis. The Board also reallocated \$270,000 to fund a feasibility study for infrastructure improvements at Saturn Boulevard to mitigate harmful emissions. In addition, on September 9, 2025 (18) the Board adopted a resolution requesting that the State Water Resources Control Board allocate Proposition 4 cross-border rivers funding to projects focused on addressing the ongoing environmental and public health crises in TJRV.

Today's action requests the Board receive the directed update on ongoing efforts to strengthen the County's response to the Tijuana River sewage crisis through strategic recommendations outlined below. A roadmap for implementation will be further refined through the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis.

Ad Hoc Subcommittee on TJRV and Sewage Chief

On June 24, 2025 (10), the Board voted to establish an ad hoc subcommittee, entitled the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis, and appointed Supervisors representing the most impacted coastal communities, District 1 and District 3. County staff have partnered with both offices to schedule the Subcommittee meetings. Through continued collaboration with the Subcommittee, staff will refine the roadmap for the implementation of various actions intended to address the negative impacts of this crisis. Included as part of these discussions will be the next steps to designate a County Sewage Crisis Chief. This position will be critical to coordinate emergency response efforts, secure and align infrastructure funding, engage with partner agencies, and keep affected communities informed and supported.

Supporting Air Filtration and HVAC Upgrades in Schools and Childcare Centers

On November 14, 2024, the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District (SDAPCD) Governing Board approved appropriation of \$2,700,000 in interest earnings accrued from State Assembly Bill 617 Community Air Protection Program incentive funds to support the purchase of air purifiers for households impacted by odors from the Tijuana River sewage crisis. SDAPCD staff developed an online application portal for eligible households to request an air purifier and replacement filters and began full implementation of the TJRV Air Improvement Relief Effort (AIRE) Program in February 2025. As of September 11, 2025, SDAPCD staff approved distribution of over 6,800 air purifier units in eligible areas as part of the AIRE Program. On August 14, 2025, the SDAPCD Governing Board took action to direct the Air Pollution Control Officer to explore options for utilizing any remaining unspent appropriations for the AIRE Program to purchase air purifiers for public schools and day care facilities within the eligible area. During a Special Hearing on September 11, 2025, the SDAPCD Governing Board received an update from SDAPCD staff on these efforts that included the finalization of grants for two school districts, planning for engagement of remaining school districts, and a streamlined program model for remaining day care facilities.

In support of SDAPCD's efforts to expand air filtration and HVAC upgrades in schools and child care centers, the County made over 40 phone calls and conducted onsite door to door visits to home-based day cares located in the impacted areas. Through this extensive outreach, many were educated on the air purifier distribution program and enrolled for the program real time. The

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County has also provided numerous meeting connections between the South Region School Leadership and SDAPCD in order to support the school HVAC upgrade process. Additionally, the County sent out air purifier flyer information to school parents via Peach Jar, reaching 17 different schools in the impacted areas. The County worked with Medi-Cal Managed Care plans and South Bay Healthcare Providers to share information about this program. HHSA's South Region Newsletter, which is sent to 2,595 South Bay subscribers, has also highlighted the program. To date, County Community Health Workers have successfully enrolled 118 individuals in the air purifier program and engaged with 649 residents on the program, which includes a weekly presence at the Border View YMCA.

Additionally, the County has taken actions in support of the broader SDAPCD AIRE Program. Upon phasing out the County's pilot program, County staff helped connect households who had signed up but did not receive a purifier or had completed an interest form with the AIRE program upon its initiation. The County has also helped promote the AIRE program through digital advertisements, placing QR codes on signs in the TJRV Park, social media postings, County News Center article, direct communications to individuals who completed Assessment of Chemical Exposures surveys, Alert San Diego messages, staffing promotoras at in-person events, and providing fliers at schools and the Imperial Beach Library branch, as well as direct communication through HHSA emails, LiveWell e-newsletter articles, GovDelivery e-mails, and text messages through Self Sufficiency Services contacts.

On June 24, 2025 (10), County staff were asked to confirm that the air purifiers being distributed were effective in reducing harmful elements in the air. The model being distributed by APCD is the Oransi Mod series, which traps hydrogen sulfide and other gasses through filters with activated carbon and potassium permanganate.

Initiating an Epidemiological Health Study on Chronic Hydrogen Sulfide Exposure

On June 24, 2025 (10), the Board directed the CAO to evaluate a set of programmatic options, including initiating an epidemiological health study on chronic hydrogen sulfide exposure. Subsequently, on September 9, 2025 (17), the Board directed the CAO to implement a health study on long-term exposure to hydrogen sulfide. In response, County staff reviewed different study methods, looking at feasibility, scientific quality, cost, and timelines. Experts and community members provided input.

Each study option has pros and cons, including cost differences, participant payment needs, enrollment challenges, and how well health outcomes can be measured. Access to needed data also varies and may require outside partnerships.

As directed by your Board, County staff will continue to work with the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis to decide which study approach is best. Additional Board authorization may be needed depending on the costs associated with the type(s) of study selected.

Exploring Infrastructure Matching Funds to Eliminate Toxic Hot Spots

On September 9, 2025 (17), the Board allocated \$270,000 in funding from an existing capital project to fund a feasibility study for infrastructure projects at Saturn Boulevard to mitigate aerosolization of hydrogen sulfide and other potential harmful compounds. The feasibility study

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is currently underway and anticipated for completion in January 2026. This study will identify short-term and long-term projects, as well as funding needs, permitting requirements, and anticipated schedules for the identified short-term and long-term projects. In tandem with the feasibility study, the County is working with state, federal, and local partners to identify and analyze a variety of existing and anticipated funding options that could be used to fund the identified projects. Such funding options could include \$50 million in funding from Proposition 4 that was allocated for water quality projects in the TJRV and New River watersheds. On September 9, 2025 (18), the Board took action directing staff to engage the State Legislative Delegation and the State Water Resources Control Board requesting allocation of the full \$50 million in Proposition 4 cross-border rivers funding to projects in the TJRV. These efforts are currently underway.

At this time, it is not known how much funding is required to implement a project or projects to mitigate aerosolization of harmful compounds at Saturn Boulevard. Once the feasibility study is completed and funding needs are known, the County will complete an analysis of external funding sources such as grants and determine how much matching County funding would be required to implement and maintain the identified project or projects.

Conducting an Economic Impact Study of Sewage Crisis

On September 9, 2025 (17), the Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer to implement an Economic Impact Study of the Sewage Crisis to evaluate losses to small businesses, declines in property values, and negative impacts on tourism.

In response, the County Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs (EDGA) has developed a proposed Statement of Work and is working in coordination with the Board and the Department of Purchasing and Contracting to expedite procurement. To accelerate vendor selection, EDGA is pursuing a Request for Statement of Qualifications (RFSQ) model, which enables the County to assess qualified firms and reduce the time from issuance to award.

EDGA anticipates the study will be completed within one year. Its findings will provide the Board and regional partners with a comprehensive assessment of economic losses and will help shape both near-term mitigation strategies and long-term recovery efforts for affected communities.

Focused Implementation of Priority Initiatives

Aligned with Board priorities and in support of the County Strategic Plan, the CAO is implementing a new approach to priority projects that focuses on short-term, enterprise-wide objectives, engages a broader range of voices to challenge conventional approaches, drives progress, and fosters a more inclusive and empowered workforce. Each project is built around a clearly defined goal aligned with Board priorities. One of these thematic goals is focused on *Improving the Lives of People Impacted by the TJRV Sewage Crisis*, ensuring focused action on environmental health, public safety, and equity in South Bay communities.

As part of these focused efforts and as regional leaders, County staff are convening and facilitating discussions with multiple agencies that are assessing and implementing strategies that reduce exposure to hydrogen sulfide in impacted communities, emphasizing air quality, land use, and water use in addition to taking action on measures within the County's jurisdiction. The team is

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engaging healthcare providers, political leaders, researchers, schools, community members, and environmental justice coalitions to shape approaches that directly respond to community needs. Staff will also pursue opportunities to sustain identified solutions and expand the County's capacity to address the root cause of this crisis. The team leading this charge will maintain transparent communication to keep the Board, the public, local municipalities, and State and federal partners informed as new strategies advance.

Residents in South Bay, who have been disproportionately affected by decades of raw sewage flowing through the TJRV, is a top concern for County leadership. Efforts continue to collaborate with all stakeholders to advocate for effective solutions and support repairs to the failing infrastructure that underlies this binational challenge. The County is vigilant in conducting surveillance and collaborating with local, State, and federal partners on health and environmental concerns for residents in South Region.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's action aligns with the County of San Diego 2025-2030 Strategic Plan initiatives of Equity (Health) and Community (Quality of Life). This will be accomplished through multidisciplinary and interagency collaborations to address the longstanding transboundary pollution that impacts environmental justice, health, and the economy in the South Region.

Respectfully submitted,



EBONY N. SHELTON
Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A