



**JIM DESMOND**  
SUPERVISOR, FIFTH DISTRICT  
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

**AGENDA ITEM**

**DATE: June 3, 2025**

**18**

**TO: Board of Supervisors**

**SUBJECT**

**ADOPTION OF RESOLUTION SUPPORTING STRONGER FEDERAL AND STATE MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE ONGOING HEALTH AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CROSS-BORDER POLLUTION IN THE TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

**OVERVIEW**

For decades, residents of South County have borne the brunt of the Tijuana River cross-border pollution crisis. They've endured toxic odors, chronic fatigue, nausea, infections, and respiratory illnesses. The ocean waters have become dangerously polluted, forcing repeated beach closures—most notably in Imperial Beach, where beaches have now been closed for well over 1,000 days. Nearby communities like Coronado have also been negatively affected. This ongoing crisis harms public health, disrupts daily life, and hurts local economies. Until recently, the issue received little attention at the federal level or in national media. That's beginning to change, with the new federal administration signaling a more serious approach, as shown by EPA Director Lee Zeldin's recent visit to the region within his first 100 days in office.

At the root of the crisis is Mexico's long-standing failure to invest in adequate sewage treatment infrastructure. As a result, hundreds of billions of gallons of raw sewage, industrial waste, and urban runoff have flowed into the Tijuana River and Pacific Ocean. While the U.S. built the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant to help address this problem, the facility was designed to handle only 25 million gallons a day. When it's overloaded or offline, untreated sewage spills directly into the river and into San Diego. Worse still, the plant doesn't treat the pollution entering through the Tijuana River itself or the sewage being dumped offshore along the western Tijuana coastline. The only lasting solution is for Mexico to build, expand, and maintain modern sewage treatment systems across the city of Tijuana.

On April 16, 2025, a majority of the Imperial Beach City Council passed Resolution No. 2025-020, strengthening their position on the continuing cross-border pollution flowing from the Tijuana River. The resolution supports a range of actions at the local, state, federal, and international levels. The County of San Diego needs to stand with the City of Imperial Beach and demand action from the federal government to hold Mexico accountable.

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The County of San Diego must adopt a similar resolution making its position clear: this crisis must be resolved now. We must demand stronger federal action and new legislation that holds Mexico accountable for its environmental obligations. With the momentum of the new federal administration, now is the time to act. Now is the time for bold, coordinated action. I urge the County of San Diego to adopt the resolution in today's item demanding immediate federal intervention and long-term solutions to end the Tijuana River pollution crisis.

**RECOMMENDATION(S)**

**SUPERVISOR JIM DESMOND**

Adopt a Resolution entitled DECLARING SUPPORT FOR ENHANCED FEDERAL AND STATE ACTIONS TO MITIGATE THE ONGOING HEALTH AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS FROM THE CROSS-BORDER POLLUTION CRISIS IN THE TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY (Attachment A)

**EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The Tijuana River pollution crisis disproportionately affects underserved communities in South County. For instance, residents in these areas might lack access to alternative recreational spaces, particularly outdoors, making them more vulnerable to the health effects of chronic sewage exposure—such as respiratory illness, infections and gastrointestinal disease. Addressing this pollution is critical to promoting public health in South County communities, ensuring fair access to clean air, water, and coastlines.

**SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The Tijuana River pollution crisis severely undermines regional sustainability goals by degrading coastal ecosystems, contaminating marine habitats and threatening biodiversity. Frequent sewage discharges introduce pathogens, toxic chemicals and solid waste into sensitive natural areas, disrupting the health of wetlands, killing wildlife, and reducing ecosystem services like natural water filtration and carbon sequestration. Without urgent intervention, the ongoing contamination jeopardizes long-term environmental resilience strategies vital for managing flood risk, sea-level rise and habitat restoration.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact associated with this item. There will be no change in net General Fund costs and no additional staff years.

**BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

The Tijuana River Pollution crisis continues to harm local businesses. Frequent and extended beach closures deter tourism and damage the hospitality and recreation industries. Property values near affected areas have declined or are at risk of declining, discouraging real estate investment. Businesses also face higher health risks for employees, particularly outdoor workers, leading to lost productivity and potential legal liabilities. Recreation-based enterprises, like surf schools and tour operators suffer when water conditions are unsafe.

**ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

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N/A

## **BACKGROUND**

At the root of the crisis is Mexico's long-standing failure to invest in adequate sewage treatment infrastructure. As a result, hundreds of billions of gallons of raw sewage, industrial waste, and urban runoff have flowed into the Tijuana River and Pacific Ocean. While the U.S. built the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant to help address this problem, the facility was designed to handle only 25 million gallons a day. When it's overloaded or offline, untreated sewage spills directly into the river and into San Diego. Worse still, the plant doesn't treat the pollution entering through the Tijuana River itself or the sewage being dumped offshore along the western Tijuana coastline. The only lasting solution is for Mexico to build, expand, and maintain modern sewage treatment systems across the city of Tijuana.

The U.S. government has treated a portion of Tijuana's sewage for close to 30 years. All the while, the Mexican government has made promises and agreements to fix the sewage issue. However, they have routinely failed to meet their obligations under minute orders and treaties. The status quo is not working; the U.S. government needs to apply further pressure and adopt new forms of leverage. The City of Imperial Beach adopted a resolution urging the federal government to enact new necessary forms of leverage against Mexico when they are not in compliance.

On April 16, 2025, a majority of the Imperial Beach City Council passed Resolution No. 2025-020, strengthening their position on the continuing cross-border pollution flowing from the Tijuana River. The resolution supports a range of actions at the local, state, federal, and international levels.

### Key highlights include:

- **Continued Emergency:** Continues to recognize a local state of emergency, consistent with neighboring communities like Coronado, Chula Vista, and San Diego, due to environmental hazards caused by the pollution.
- **Congressional Action:** Urge the U.S. Congress to pass laws that would hold Mexico accountable under international environmental treaties for failing to stop the flow of sewage and waste into U.S. waters.
- **Infrastructure:** Request for faster action by the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) to design and build:
  - A new diversion system to capture and treat polluted flows from the Tijuana River.
  - A permanent system to catch trash before it enters the U.S. side of the river.
- **Funding:** Calls for the federal government to combine \$200 million from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers with up to \$50 million from California's climate bond funds to expedite cleanup and restoration efforts.
- **Opposition to Desalination without Reforms:** Opposes a planned desalination plant in Playas de Rosarito unless Mexico commits to expanding wastewater recycling projects and proves it can treat water properly before any new drinking water is introduced into the region.

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- **Revenue from Mexico:** Asks regional planners (SANDAG) to pursue ways for Mexico to contribute toll revenue to offset the environmental damage linked to border development.
- **Trade and Water Restrictions:** In severe pollution cases that threaten public health, allow the U.S. Congress to:
  - Restrict U.S. water exports to Tijuana.
  - Place temporary limits on commercial crossings at U.S. ports of entry.
  - Divert or restrict the Tijuana River's flow to prevent contamination.
- **Executive Action:** Calls on the President of the United States to issue an Executive Order requiring federal agencies like the EPA, State Department, and Navy to take immediate enforcement actions.
- **Emergency Declarations:** Urges California's Governor and the President of the United States to officially declare a state of emergency over the Tijuana River pollution crisis.
- **Federal Funding:** Lastly, the resolution calls on Congress to fully fund the International Wastewater Treatment Plant, including future upgrades and ongoing operations.

By adopting this resolution, the City of Imperial Beach has taken a decisive and courageous step toward confronting one of our region's most persistent environmental and public health challenges. Their action underscores strong local leadership **in the face of disproportionate harm**—and sends a clear message: we need greater accountability, urgent infrastructure investment, and more meaningful collaboration between governments. It's in that same spirit that today's resolution is being brought forward. We must stand in solidarity with communities like Imperial Beach and push for real, lasting solutions. The health of our residents, the future health of our coastal waters, and the integrity of our shared border environment are all at stake. It's time to hold Mexico accountable, secure the infrastructure we need, and make sure our region's voice is heard at every level of government. We've waited long enough.

The core of the issue is the lack of sewage infrastructure. The U.S. would not need the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant to begin with if Mexico properly treated their sewage and built the necessary infrastructure. The solution to the issue lies with the Mexican government prioritizing the issue and properly investing in sewage infrastructure in the Tijuana region. New methods of leverage could be used to hold the Mexican government accountable, such limiting cross-border activity during health or pollution crisis caused by the sewage discharges. The federal government could allow local municipalities to temporarily restrict or divert water from the Tijuana River to prevent sewage flows. Further use of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, tariffs, and limitation of commercial crossing should be considered and utilized. In addition, the State of California, and the federal government, should join our local municipalities, and declare a state of emergency over the Tijuana sewage crisis to show the urgency and important of this issue.

The County of San Diego must adopt a similar resolution making its position clear: this crisis must be resolved now. We must demand stronger federal action, increased funding, and new legislation that holds Mexico accountable for its environmental obligations. With the momentum of the new federal administration, now is the time to act. Now is the time for bold, coordinated action. I urge

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the County of San Diego to adopt the resolution in today's item demanding immediate federal intervention and long-term solutions to end the Tijuana River pollution crisis.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Today's proposed actions support Sustainability and Equity initiatives in the County's 2025-30 Strategic Plan by combatting environmental justice, health, and economic issues resulting from the decades long transboundary pollution crisis.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Desmond', written in a cursive style.

JIM DESMOND  
Supervisor, Fifth District

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

Attachment A- A RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS OF THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO SUPPORTING STRONGER FEDERAL AND STATE MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE ONGOING HEALTH AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CROSS-BORDER POLLUTION IN THE TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY