



# City of Imperial Beach, California

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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June 6, 2023

The White House  
Council of Environmental Quality  
722 Jackson Place NW  
Washington, DC 20503

**Subject: Request for Federal State of Emergency for the Tijuana River Transboundary Pollution Crisis**

Dear Honorable Brenda Mallory:

As Mayor of Imperial Beach, I am writing to strongly urge the Biden-Harris Administration to fulfill their commitments to support Environmental Justice communities and take decisive action to address the severe pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. The Imperial Beach shoreline located in South San Diego County is tragically recognized as the most polluted stretch of sandy beach in the entire country. With over 500 consecutive days of beach closures due to the ongoing influx of sewage, industrial discharges, and trash from the Tijuana River, the community of Imperial Beach is bearing the brunt of this environmental disaster. Pollution in the Tijuana River remains the most urgent environmental justice issue in San Diego County.

I am formally requesting a **Federal Emergency Declaration for the Tijuana River Valley and the shoreline of Imperial Beach**. The continuous influx of transboundary pollution is wreaking havoc on the local community, economy, and environment along the coastline of South San Diego County. Since October 2018, the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission has documented the entry of over 100 billion gallons of toxic effluent into the United States through the Tijuana River, with an additional 35 billion gallons crossing the international border since December 28, alone.<sup>1</sup>

The extent of this pollution has been studied for decades including recent research from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography with funding from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that attributes 34,000 illnesses in calendar year 2017 to water quality pollution along the Imperial Beach coastline<sup>2</sup>. The high levels of coastal water pollution are even impacting local air quality<sup>3</sup>. Researchers are monitoring the airborne transmission pathways for coastal water pollution and documenting concerning levels of industrial chemicals and pathogens from aerosol sea spray generated from wind and ocean waves<sup>4</sup>. These potential public health concerns are why the Cities of Imperial Beach and San Diego maintain an ongoing State of Local Emergency related to the impacts of cross-border pollution in the Tijuana River. In addition, County of San Diego has declared a Public Health Crisis for the Tijuana River Valley. The coastal communities of South San Diego County including the City of Imperial Beach face an immense challenge from the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River that is beyond local and state control. It is a public health emergency that requires a Federal Emergency Declaration to coordinate and prioritize a multi-agency response to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://waterdata.ibwc.gov/Data/Dashboard/8>

<sup>2</sup> Falk Feddersen et al. "Modeling Untreated Wastewater Evolution and Swimmer Illness for Four Wastewater Infrastructure Scenarios in the San Diego-Tijuana (US/MX) Border Region" October 28, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2021GH000490>

<sup>3</sup> Matthew A. Pendergraft et al. "Airborne Transmission Pathway for Coastal Water Pollution" PeerJ; 2021. <https://peerj.com/articles/11358/>

<sup>4</sup> Matthew A. Pendergraft et al. "Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol" Environmental Science & Technology; 2023. <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.2c02312?ref=pdf>

this ongoing disaster. The continuous flow of untreated sewage and other pollutants into our waters is unacceptable and must be addressed immediately.

Over the past decade, local agencies have forged a strong partnership with federal agencies to develop comprehensive solutions for the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. Our collaborative efforts have resulted in an initial allocation of \$300 million through the United States, Mexico, and Canada Agreement (USMCA) to identify and implement a comprehensive approach to solve the longstanding pollution problem in the Tijuana River. The EPA has already prepared a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement and identified the preferred list of projects that are necessary to ultimately control the discharge of wastewater, trash, and sedimentation into the Tijuana River Valley. Unfortunately, more funding and federal agency coordination is needed to move these projects forward.

An entire generation of children is growing up in South San Diego County, having only experienced polluted beaches. While we appreciate the EPA's identification of a comprehensive solution, the reality remains that these projects are still years away from implementation, with no sense of urgency from federal officials to address funding shortfalls. We implore a Federal Emergency Declaration to expedite funding and implementation of projects across multiple federal agencies. The pollution disaster in the Tijuana River warrants the same level of federal agency coordination and response as other national crises such as the Ohio toxic train derailment, Flint water crisis, the 2021 Orange County oil spill, devastating hurricanes, and destructive atmospheric river storms. These examples highlight the urgent need for immediate action and the importance of a coordinated response to protect the health and well-being of our communities.

Just as federal agencies and resources are mobilized to respond to natural disasters like hurricanes, a Federal Emergency Declaration for the Tijuana River would enable the coordination and allocation of critical resources to address this ongoing environmental catastrophe. The same level of urgency, funding, and comprehensive action that is applied to other national emergencies, whether natural or man-made, must be extended to the pollution crisis in the Tijuana River. Our communities cannot afford to wait for years for these projects to be implemented while the health and well-being of our residents and the environment continue to suffer.

As the Mayor of the most southwestern City in the continental U.S., I am urgently appealing to the Biden-Harris Administration to fulfill their commitments to support Environmental Justice communities and take decisive action to address the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River.



Paloma Aguirre  
Mayor of Imperial Beach  
City of Imperial Beach

CC:

Senator Alex Padilla  
Senator Dianne Feinstein  
Congressman Juan Vargas  
Congressman Scott Peters  
Congresswoman Sara Jacobs  
Congressman Mike Levin  
Governor Gavin Newsom  
Assemblymember David Alvarez  
Assemblymember Steve Padilla  
USEPA EPA Regional Administrator Martha Guzman  
CALEPA Secretary for Environmental Protection Yana Garcia  
California Coastal Commission Executive Director Kate Huckelbridge  
California Coastal Commission Chair Donne Brownsey  
San Diego Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Nora Vargas  
San Diego Board of Supervisors Terra Lawson-Remer  
Mayor Montserrat Caballero

