

TIJUANA RIVER / RIO TIJUANA

THREAT: Pollution

STATES: California (United States), Baja California (Mexico)

AT RISK: Clean water, public health

SUMMARY

The Tijuana River Watershed, ancestral and current homeland of the Kumeyaay Nation and home to millions of people on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, is steeped in rich multicultural identities. The river joins the Pacific Ocean at beautiful beaches that were once frequented by families, swimmers, and surfers but are now choked with pollution, limiting coastal access and causing serious threats to public health.

Decades of mismanagement and under-investment in wastewater infrastructure have led to egregious and long-running Clean Water Act violations, hurting ecosystems, forcing beach closures, and causing widespread illnesses. Frontline communities have been advocating for solutions for decades, but despite recent progress, roadblocks continue to stand in the way. President Biden and Congress must act now to address this crisis.

THE RIVER

The Tijuana River travels 120 miles through northwest Baja California and the Tijuana Estuary in southern California before reaching the Pacific Ocean. Its 1,750-square-mile watershed is home to the Kumeyaay Nation and over 2.8 million residents on both sides of the border. While the lower watershed in the United States is largely undeveloped, the majority of the Tijuana River Watershed lies within northwestern Mexico and is extensively developed.

The Tijuana estuary is a National Estuarine Research Reserve with several diverse and sensitive habitats. As the largest remaining natural coastal wetland in southern California and one of the few remaining salt marshes, it provides home to over 370 birds and multiple endangered species.

The river mouth flows into a marine protected area and a world-renowned surf break known as “The Sloughs.” With unparalleled beauty and world-class waves, surfers used to flock to this break but now sewage-laden waters put their health at risk. The local health agency has closed the beach for over 780 days and counting.

THE THREAT

For over a century, toxic waste and raw sewage have flowed into the Tijuana River Watershed and out into the Pacific Ocean, sickening people and wildlife. These year-round transboundary flows easily measure 35-50 million gallons per day and carry trash from Tijuana’s urban area, untreated wastewater from failing treatment systems and sub-standard sewage disposal, and toxic industrial waste from factories upstream. When it rains, the high volume of water and pollution overwhelms regional infrastructure and creates dangerous conditions for the natural environment and local communities in the U.S. and Mexico.

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TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/
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Wastewater treatment plants on both sides of the border regularly fail and are severely under-capacity due to decades of under-investment and deferred maintenance. The resulting sewage discharges into the Pacific Ocean do not meet U.S. or Mexican regulations and travel up the coast with summer currents, impacting visitors, residents, and ecosystems. A study by Scripps Institute of Oceanography linked 34,000 illnesses in 2017 to water pollution on the affected Imperial Beach coastline. Recent studies reported that sewage routinely aerosolizes in the air from sea spray, causing widespread respiratory illnesses.

People are getting sick not only when playing in the ocean or sitting on the beach, but also while standing in their own backyards from breathing in toxins. Doctors are noting correlations between urgent care visits and coastal pollution events. San Diego County is installing air monitors in inland border communities to understand air quality and public health impacts. Lifeguards, emergency responders, Navy Seals, and Border Patrol Agents work and train in contaminated environments, risking their own health. “An entire generation of children is growing up in South San Diego County, having only experienced polluted beaches”, wrote Imperial Beach Mayor Aguirre in her June 6 letter to the Biden administration. This is a grave public health crisis and an environmental justice emergency.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

We now have the Comprehensive Infrastructure Solution (CIS), vetted by the EPA, impacted community members, and relevant agencies to begin to solve this

decades-long public health crisis. Yet, we still don't have the full funding needed to upgrade and expand the International Wastewater Treatment Plant (ITP) in the U.S. and make other needed infrastructure fixes. In August 2023, Hurricane Hilary revealed that years of deferred maintenance at the ITP will cost significantly more to fix, bringing the total price tag to nearly \$1 billion. Additional funding will be continually required to maintain border water infrastructure and prevent this from happening again.

There are few existing pathways to fund this project, all of which require action by Congress or the President. Until enough political will is galvanized to prioritize this crisis—and provide the immediate relief and funding needed to solve the border water infrastructure problems once and for all—border communities will continue to suffer, ecosystems will continue to be destroyed, and our beaches and tourism industries will continue to decline.

Congress and the Biden Administration must take decisive and immediate action to address the crisis in the Tijuana River Watershed by fully funding the solutions needed to restore a clean and safe environment for the affected communities.

WILD COAST