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# TIJUANA RIVER / RIO TIJUANA

**THREAT:** Pollution

**STATES:** California (United States), Baja California (México)

**AT RISK:** Clean water, public health

## SUMMARY

The Tijuana River is known for its communities on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border as well as stunning beaches, world-class surf breaks and diverse wildlife. This region, however, has been plagued with severe pollution for decades. Every day, millions of gallons of contaminated stormwater, sewage, harmful chemicals, and trash flow down the river into the Pacific Ocean. Major federal investments are needed to solve this growing environmental and public health crises.

## THE RIVER

The Tijuana River travels 120 miles through northwest Baja California and the Tijuana River Valley 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's home to over 370 bird species and multiple endangered wildlife species.

The river mouth flows into a marine protected area and a world-renowned surf break known as "The Sloughs." Surfers used to flock to this break but now sewage-laden waters put their health at risk. As of January 2025, San Diego County has closed the southernmost beach for over 1,200 days and counting.

## THE THREAT

The Tijuana River Watershed has been plagued with severe pollution for decades. Every day, millions of gallons of contaminated sewage choke the river. The transboundary flows, that regularly exceed 35 to 50 million gallons per day, carry sewage and trash from Tijuana's urban area, wastewater from sub-standard and failing sewage treatment systems, and toxic industrial waste from factories upstream in Tijuana's maquiladora zones. When it rains, raw sewage mixes with stormwater, overwhelming water treatment infrastructure and creating dangerous water quality conditions for people, fish, and wildlife on both sides of the border.

RAMON CHAIREZ



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## TAKE ACTION:

**AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/  
TIJUANARIVER2025**



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LA TIMES

Local health authorities have issued closures to protect public health at the once world-class beaches, where the Tijuana River empties into the Pacific Ocean. Recent studies have also shown that aerosolization of toxins in the surf and in the main river channel are causing health issues such as respiratory distress, chronic headaches, allergic reactions, and gastrointestinal illness. Children and people with compromised immune systems are particularly at risk.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Community activists and local leaders have formed a coalition by uniting over 50 local organizations, policymakers, and government agencies to build awareness of pollution-related public health threats and advocate for solutions at all levels of government.

The coalition's advocacy efforts have helped to secure hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to implement the Comprehensive Infrastructure Solution (CIS) – vetted by the federal government, impacted communities, and local governments – but Congress needs to authorize millions more to finish the project, ensure long-term maintenance, and to fund a much needed river diversion project, which would prevent harmful pollution from flowing in the main river channel near residential neighborhoods and schools.

Protecting our communities and ensuring clean water is a non-partisan issue — it's a matter of basic governance and national responsibility. A federal emergency declaration by the Trump administration would prioritize funding needs and would provide immediate relief to frontline communities, such as air filters, baseline health studies, pollution monitoring, and regional public advisories.

Without swift action, communities will continue to suffer, ecosystems will degrade, local economies will decline — and, as members of the military and Border Patrol are sickened by the pollution, national security will be threatened. The Trump administration must act decisively to declare a federal emergency to address this public health crisis.