County Of San Diego

Board Of Supervisors

1600 Pacific Highway, Room 335, San Diego, California 92101-2470

Agenda Item

Date: **September 1, 2026** **13**

To: Board of Supervisors

Launching the County of San Diego's Tijuana River Capture and Cleanup Initiative (Districts: All)

Overview

The Tijuana River Valley pollution crisis continues to impose significant and far-reaching environmental, economic, and public health burdens on communities throughout San Diego County. The situation has escalated into an entrenched regional emergency marked by chronic infrastructure failure and severe transboundary contamination polluting water, air, and soil in the Tijuana River Valley.

Between 2018 and 2026, more than 200 billion gallons of polluted water crossed into the United States through the Tijuana River, carrying sewage, industrial chemicals, pesticides, heavy metals, and "forever chemicals" into the river valley and coastal waters.[i] Hydrogen sulfide levels at the Saturn Boulevard hot spot have reached 16 times state air quality standards. Residents report respiratory irritation, headaches, nausea, and psychological distress, while UCSD Scripps researchers estimate water pollution causes roughly 34,000 illnesses annually in Imperial Beach alone.[ii] [iii]

Our Congressional delegation has stepped up, securing more than $650 million to double the capacity of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (SBIWTP), a critical win, and the County of San Diego (County) strongly supports finishing that work as fast as possible.[iv]

But even with that investment, our communities remain exposed. The SBIWTP treats sewage that Mexico captures and conveys to it. It does nothing to address river pollution once it crosses over the border. After sixty years, that is the gap that has no solution: the U.S. side of the Tijuana River is not treated at all. Once sewage and toxic runoff are in the river, nothing protects our coastlines and communities from the impacts.

The infrastructure that would stop pollution at its source sits on the other side of an international border, subject to Mexico's funding, timeline, and political decisions. The County has no authority

over any of it. Meanwhile, Tijuana's population is projected to grow 40% by 2050, threatening to further widen this critical infrastructure gap.[v]

San Diego can't fully control the upstream systems driving the pollution, but we can advance substantive solutions to this crisis by accelerating U.S.-side infrastructure that captures, treats, and reduces pollution before it reaches our communities.

That is why the County is launching this initiative, so our region finally steps up and builds the local, regional solution that protects our coastline and our communities, on our own timeline.

Today's action establishes the County's Tijuana River Capture and Cleanup Initiative (Initiative)**.** As described below, the Initiative is intended to be a County-led, phased effort to build a new treatment plant and associated infrastructure on the U.S. side of the border that can capture and treat polluted Tijuana River flows before they move downstream into San Diego communities and beaches. For the first time, this effort will directly intercept and treat this pollution ourselves, rather than relying solely on infrastructure and action upstream in Mexico.

The Initiative is expected to be delivered in three phases on an aggressive timeframe, with phasing and sequencing refined as the project advances. This includes pursuing state of emergency declarations to accelerate permitting processes, and pursuing state legislation to provide this project with an accelerated review and permitting process. Advancing infrastructure at this scale will require new dedicated revenue sources and funding partnerships to support future design, construction, and long-term operations. All phases will include robust community engagement.

Phase 1 Project Development
Phase 1 will establish clear goals and develop an alternatives analysis, including core engineering parameters, treatment levels, weighing the cost, site control, locational footprints, operational considerations, financing strategies, and delivery timeframe. This phase will return to the Board with options for consideration and selection of the final project to advance to preliminary design. The projected timeline for this phase is 18 months.

Phase 2 Preliminary Engineering Design
Once the Board selects a preferred project, Phase 2 advances it through preliminary engineering design and funding strategy development — refining design, costs, and delivery approach ahead of final design, permitting, and construction.

Phase 3 Final Design, Permitting, Construction, Project Delivery
Phase 3 carries the selected project through final design and permitting and environmental review — including CEQA and NEPA, and approvals from the Regional Water Quality Control Board, the California Coastal Commission, the International Boundary and Water Commission, and other required agencies — and construction, using a progressive delivery model to overlap these steps where possible.

Today's action also transitions the Board's Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis into a standing committee, giving this initiative permanent Board oversight through every phase of delivery.

Establishing a local capture and treatment system will finally give our region control over polluted river flows before they reach our communities and coastline, safeguarding public health, the environment, local economies, and the region's long-term future.

For 60 years, major efforts to address this crisis have focused on stopping pollution at its source in Mexico. Today, we take the next step by advancing a serious plan to build additional infrastructure here at home.

Recommendation by Chair Terra Lawson-Remer and Chair Pro-Tem Paloma Aguirre

1) Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to implement the first phase of the Tijuana River Capture and Cleanup Initiative by utilizing the Department of Public Works' existing as-needed consultant contract(s) for a robust project development and engineering analysis to identify infrastructure solutions for the Tijuana River pollution crisis and recommend funding strategies. This analysis will consider prior research and publicly vetted solutions, as well as potential new concepts, funding and operational strategies, and community input. This initiative will include comprehensive solutions and strategies to address the range of toxins in the Tijuana River and end the public health crisis.
2) Direct the CAO to allocate $1,800,000 within the Unlocked Reserves Framework for Phase 1 of the Tijuana River Capture and Cleanup Initiative.
3) Transfer appropriations of $1,800,000 from Finance Other, Services & Supplies, to the Department of Public Works General Fund, Services & Supplies, to fund Phase 1 of the Tijuana River Capture and Cleanup Initiative, based on available prior year Unrestricted General Fund balance identified as Unlocked Reserves.
4) Transition the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis to a standing committee. The ad hoc subcommittee would be dissolved, and the new standing committee would be entitled 'Standing Committee on the Tijuana River Pollution Crisis.'

Equity Impact Statement

Communities across the region experience the public health, environmental, economic, and quality-of-life impacts of the Tijuana River pollution crisis, with the most severe burdens falling on communities closest to the river and coastline. The proposed actions advance a long-term infrastructure solution to capture and treat polluted river flows on the U.S. side of the border before they reach downstream communities and beaches, helping reduce longstanding disparities in exposure and environmental health impacts.

Sustainability Impact Statement

Today's actions advance the County's health, water quality, and environmental sustainability goals by developing infrastructure to capture and treat polluted Tijuana River flows before they reach downstream communities, beaches, and sensitive ecosystems. The initiative will support cleaner water, healthier communities, and greater long-term environmental resilience across the region.

Fiscal Impact
Funds for this request are included in the Fiscal Year 2026–27 Operational Plan in Finance Other. If approved, this action will result in a one-time cost of $1,800,000 for Phase 1 of Tijuana River Capture and Clean-Up Initiative. The funding source is prior year Unrestricted General Fund balance, made available as unlocked reserves and included in Finance Other to address infrastructure issues, protect public health and continue to mitigate sewage issues in the region. There will be fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations which staff would return to the Board for consideration and approval. There will be no additional staff years as a result of today's recommendations.

Business Impact Statement
The Tijuana River pollution crisis disrupts economic activity across the region by exposing workers and residents to unhealthy air, closing beaches, and affecting schools, businesses, tourism, recreation, and other community institutions. Recurring pollution can interfere with daily operations, reduce access to public spaces, and create ongoing costs and uncertainty for employers and families. Advancing a long-term solution to capture and treat polluted river flows will help protect public health, reduce economic disruption, and support a healthier and more resilient regional economy.

Advisory Board Statement
N/A

Background
For decades, communities throughout San Diego County have endured severe environmental, economic, and public health consequences stemming from the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River Valley. Between 2018 and 2026, river gauges at the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant recorded more than 200 billion gallons of polluted water flowing into the United States.[vi] These continuous discharges have embedded contamination throughout the riverbed, wetlands, estuary, and nearshore ocean.

The crisis extends far beyond sewage. Industrial waste containing heavy metals, banned pesticides, and persistent "forever chemicals" has also been detected in the river. As a result, children have grown up without ever being able to safely swim at their own beach, and numerous beaches have remained closed for more than four years. [vii]

When the river crosses the U.S. border, flows converge at a "hot spot" near Saturn Boulevard where pollution becomes aerosolized, releasing toxic hydrogen sulfide (H_2S) into nearby neighborhoods. Communities including Otay Mesa West, San Ysidro, Egger Highlands, Nestor, and Imperial Beach are regularly exposed to these fumes. Recent H_2S spikes have exceeded 500 parts per billion—more than sixteen times the state standard of 30 ppb.[viii]

This contamination has clear health impacts. Research by Scripps Institution of Oceanography attributed roughly 34,000 illnesses in 2017 to water-quality pollution along Imperial Beach's coastline.[ix] Complementary CDC survey data show that community members are indeed feeling ill: 92 percent of respondents report not feeling safe in the areas where they live and work; 64

percent report new or worsening physical symptoms; and significant portions report anxiety (28 percent) and depression (21 percent). Notably, 65 percent of participants believe their mental-health symptoms are directly linked to the sewage crisis.[x]

The problem also affects military personnel and critical workers. Navy SEALs training off Coronado have reported nearly 1,200 illnesses over a four-year period due to exposure to polluted water. Lifeguards, Border Patrol agents, and farmworkers who spend their days near the river report similar health issues. [xi]

Compounding these challenges is the rapid population growth in Tijuana, projected to increase by 40 percent by 2050, which will place additional strain on already overburdened wastewater infrastructure and increase pressure on the river system. [xii]

For decades, infrastructure failures on both sides of the U.S. Mexico border have contributed to the ongoing pollution crisis in the Tijuana River Valley. Aging, overloaded, and frequently malfunctioning wastewater systems in Tijuana routinely spill raw sewage into the river, while gaps in infrastructure leave the region unable to prevent contaminated water from entering local beaches and communities.

Together, these systemic breakdowns create a cycle in which untreated sewage and industrial waste continually cross the border, overwhelming existing facilities and exposing residents to ongoing environmental and public health hazards. Strengthening and modernizing infrastructure in both countries is essential to preventing future failures and resolving this binational crisis.

THE MISSING PIECE: CAPTURE AND CLEAN UP POLLUTED RIVER FLOWS

There has been significant attention on the expansion of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (SBIWTP). In recent years, the San Diego Congressional delegation helped secure more than $650 million to increase the plant's capacity and address longstanding inadequate maintenance. This funding supports critical upgrades needed to restore reliable performance.[xiii]

However, the SBIWTP expansion addresses only part of the overall problem. Currently, the plant treats wastewater that is captured in Tijuana and conveyed to the facility. It does not treat polluted flows of the Tijuana River.

Published figures indicate Tijuana generates roughly 67 million gallons of measured wastewater per day; an additional 10% of wastewater reaches the river outside formal collection systems, making the effective wastewater total approximately 74 million gallons per day (MGD). Even during dry weather, roughly 20 MGD bypasses treatment. Total generation is projected to rise toward 102 MGD by 2050 as the population grows by about 40 percent toward 2.4 million people. [xiv]

The SBIWTP expansion raises U.S.-side capacity to 50 MGD on average, with a 75 MGD peak. In wet weather, transboundary flows average about 109 MGD, which exceeds even the plant's 75

MGD peak capacity. Taken together, these figures indicate a residual volume that currently funded federal and Mexican infrastructure is not sized to be captured reliably.[xv]

The San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board reports that SBIWTP lacks infrastructure to capture or treat transboundary flows in the Tijuana River's main channel, resulting in untreated sewage, polluted runoff, and toxins entering San Diego communities and coastlines.

The County has taken action to mitigate the crisis by distributing air purifiers, advancing immediate and permanent solutions to address the Saturn Boulevard hot spot, enhancing air and water monitoring, and pursuing federal, state, and binational partners for collaborative solutions. However, more permanent infrastructure solutions are needed to address the root cause.

The Tijuana River Capture and Cleanup Initiative shifts our County from ongoing emergency response toward a defined phased pathway that captures polluted river flows, directs them into treatment, and advances an operational system that protects San Diego communities.

COUNTY'S TIJUANA RIVER CAPTURE AND CLEANUP INITIATIVE

The initiative would establish a phased program to develop, design, permit, finance, and construct a locally controlled treatment and diversion system for polluted Tijuana River flows. "Capture and cleanup" describes the goal in plain language. For technical implementation, the initiative includes the work necessary to evaluate diversion, conveyance, treatment, ocean outfall, beneficial reuse, long-term operations, and financing strategies.

A project of this scale requires engineering, site control, environmental review, permits, financing, construction, and long-term operations and maintenance. It is our commitment to drive this major treatment project forward from design to operation with maximum urgency. The Initiative is expected to be delivered in three phases on an aggressive timeframe, with phasing and sequencing refined as the project advances. This includes pursuing state of emergency declarations to accelerate permitting processes, and pursuing state legislation to provide this project with an accelerated review and permitting process. Advancing infrastructure at this scale will require new dedicated revenue sources and funding partnerships to support future design, construction, and long-term operations. All phases will include robust community engagement.

THREE-PHASE PATHWAY

Phase 1: Project Evaluation and Development
Federal and binational agencies have already developed serious concepts for diverting and treating polluted Tijuana River flows. Phase 1 would build on that work and prepare the County to act by evaluating project pathway options, identifying the site and land rights, mapping permits, estimating costs, developing financing options.

Phase 1 will complete the evaluation and planning necessary for the Board to consider treatment options and consider tradeoffs. This includes examining the treatment levels evaluated in EPA's 2021 river diversion study, as well as a range of factors, including potential site locations and land

rights, capital and operating costs, interjurisdictional partnerships, ownership and operating models. A robust stakeholder engagement strategy would accompany this work, including communities most impacted by the crisis, public health experts, water agencies, environmental organizations, labor, business, regional partners, and binational stakeholders.

Phase 1 is expected to return to the Board within 18 months with an analysis of top options for board consideration and selection.

Phase 2 Preliminary Engineering Design
Once the Board selects a preferred project, Phase 2 advances it through preliminary engineering and funding strategy development — refining design, costs, and delivery approach ahead of final design, permitting, and construction.

Phase 3 Final Design, Permitting, Construction, Project Delivery
Phase 3 carries the selected project through final design and permitting and environmental review — including CEQA and NEPA, and any necessary permits from regulatory agencies— and construction, using a progressive delivery model to overlap these steps where possible.

For too long, South Bay communities have been asked to live with a level of pollution and public health risk that would never be accepted anywhere else in our region. Clean air, clean water, and safe beaches should not depend on which side of the County you live on or whether another government acts first. With this initiative, the County is choosing to take responsibility for what we can control, build the infrastructure our communities deserve, and finally move toward ending this crisis for good.

Linkage to the County of San Diego Strategic Plan
Today's actions align with the County of San Diego's 2026–2031 Strategic Plan "Equity" and "Community" initiatives by addressing longstanding environmental injustices and improving quality of life in the region. This item also supports the County's efforts to promote Health equity and Environmental Stewardship for all residents

Respectfully submitted,

Terra Lawson-Remer
Supervisor, Third District

Paloma Aguirre
Supervisor, First District

Attachment(s)
N/A

[i] [1] United States International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC). (2026). USIBWC Water Data Portal - Main-Channel River Gage. United States International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC). https://waterdata.ibwc.gov/AQWebportal/Data

[ii] [1] San Diego Air Pollution Control District Hydrogen Sulfide Monitoring. Air Quality Monitoring - San Diego County Air District

[iii] UCSD Scripps Institute of Oceanography. Imperial Beach seeks federal assistance in ceasing ongoing pollution from Tijuana River sewage spill – NBC 7 San Diego

[iv] Congressional Delegation Funding. Rep. Peters Introduces Bill to Shore up Funding to Address Toxic Wastewater in the Tijuana River Valley | Congressman Scott Peters

[v] [1] Liden, D., & Giner, M. E. (2026). Tijuana River Contamination Crisis: A Five-Pillar Framework for Binational Solutions (pp. 8, 10–20). San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. Tijuana-River-Contamination-Crisis-Report-SDRCC.pdf

[vi] United States International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC). (2026). USIBWC Water Data Portal - Main-Channel River Gage. United States International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC). https://waterdata.ibwc.gov/AQWebportal/Data

[vii] River and Coastal Water VOC Emissions Drive Spatial and Diurnal Air Quality Variability. River and Coastal Water VOC Emissions Drive Spatial and Diurnal Air Quality Variability | Semantic Scholar

[viii] San Diego Air Pollution Control District Hydrogen Sulfide Monitoring. Air Quality Monitoring - San Diego County Air District

[ix] UCSD Scripps Institute of Oceanography. Imperial Beach seeks federal assistance in ceasing ongoing pollution from Tijuana River sewage spill – NBC 7 San Diego

[x] County of San Diego Health and Human Services, & Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). Tijuana River Valley Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER) (pp. 10, 28). County of San Diego. https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/Epidemiology/south region-gi-illness/Tijuana-River-Valley_Report_20250115.pdf

[xi] Inspector General. U.S. Department of Defense Report No. DODIG-2025-067: Management Advisory: Naval Special Warfare Command Should Relocate, Reschedule, or Cancel Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Candidate Water Training When Water Bacteria Levels Exceed State Safety Standards

[xii] Liden, D., & Giner, M. E. (2026). Tijuana River Contamination Crisis: A Five-Pillar Framework for Binational Solutions (pp. 8, 10–20). San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. Tijuana-River-Contamination-Crisis-Report-SDRCC.pdf

[xiii] Congressional Delegation Funding. Rep. Peters Introduces Bill to Shore up Funding to Address Toxic Wastewater in the Tijuana River Valley | Congressman Scott Peters

[xiv] Liden, D., & Giner, M. E. (2026). Tijuana River Contamination Crisis: A Five-Pillar Framework for Binational Solutions (pp. 8, 10–20). San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. https://sdchamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Tijuana-River-Contamination-Crisis-Report SDRCC.pdf

[xv] US Environmental Protection Agency. (2021, January 13). USMCA Tijuana River Watershed. Www.epa.gov; US Environmental Protection Agency. https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/usmca-tijuana-river-watershed *EPA reports that wet-weather events cause an average of 109 million gallons per day of transboundary flows.