

US, Mexico pledge half a billion dollars to fight cross-border pollution from Tijuana River sewage

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A nearly half-billion-dollar investment in new sewage treatment facilities in Tijuana could clean up perpetually polluted beaches in San Diego,

U.S. and Mexican officials say.

Officials from both countries signed a treaty through the International Boundary and Water Commission that commits to funding new sanitation projects during a ceremony at the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve in Imperial Beach on Thursday.

The agreement pledges about \$350 million in U.S. spending and \$144 million from the Mexican government to replace failing sewage [treatment](#) facilities in Tijuana.

The combined funding would build a [treatment plant](#) by 2027 that would halve the number of days when wastewater flows north from Mexico to Imperial Beach and other coastal San Diego communities and would reduce untreated wastewater discharged to the Pacific Ocean by 80 percent, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Cross-border pollution has plagued the Tijuana and southern San Diego region for decades, causing illnesses such as diarrhea and respiratory disease as well as environmental damage.

The problem has worsened over the past five years as aging sewage treatment facilities have deteriorated further, leaking [raw sewage](#) into the Pacific, said Rep. Scott Peters, D-Calif.

"Because their infrastructure is really decrepit and has not been maintained, the treatment plant is falling apart, so sewage is falling into the water—not through a pipe with partial treatment, but without any treatment," Peters said.

Recent health studies have found that viral contaminants in the water may be higher than previously thought. Compounding the problem is the fact that the treatment plant's capacity has declined as the amount of

sewage generated by Tijuana has grown.

"They have a double problem—growing population and failing infrastructure," Peters said.

The agreement, called Minute No. 328, calls for doubling the capacity of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant in the U.S. and building a new treatment plant in Tijuana.

The combined projects would boost sewage treatment capacity by 43 million gallons per day, according to the EPA. They would also repair or replace deteriorating sewer lines and pump stations in Tijuana to prevent sewage spills.

The U.S. funding for those projects includes \$300 million that was authorized as part of the 2020 United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. That money was tied up because of [legal restrictions](#), but last month Reps. Sara Jacobs, D-Calif., and Juan Vargas, D-Calif., introduced a legislative fix to allow the EPA to transfer the funds to the International Boundary and Water Commission for wastewater treatment.

An additional \$50 million was authorized under last year's federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Peters said.

Mexico recently made a binding commitment to invest \$144 million in the project, officials said.

"It's not just a statement of intent, but it's the next level of commitment," Peters said. "This will be enforced as a treaty."

Although the new facility is slated for completion by 2027, Peters said that's a conservative timeline and officials hope to build it sooner. In the meantime, he said, [sewage](#) spills can be detained or diverted further

offshore to help prevent beach pollution on both sides of the border.

"I think we all understand that we can't have these beaches closed in the summer," Peters said.

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