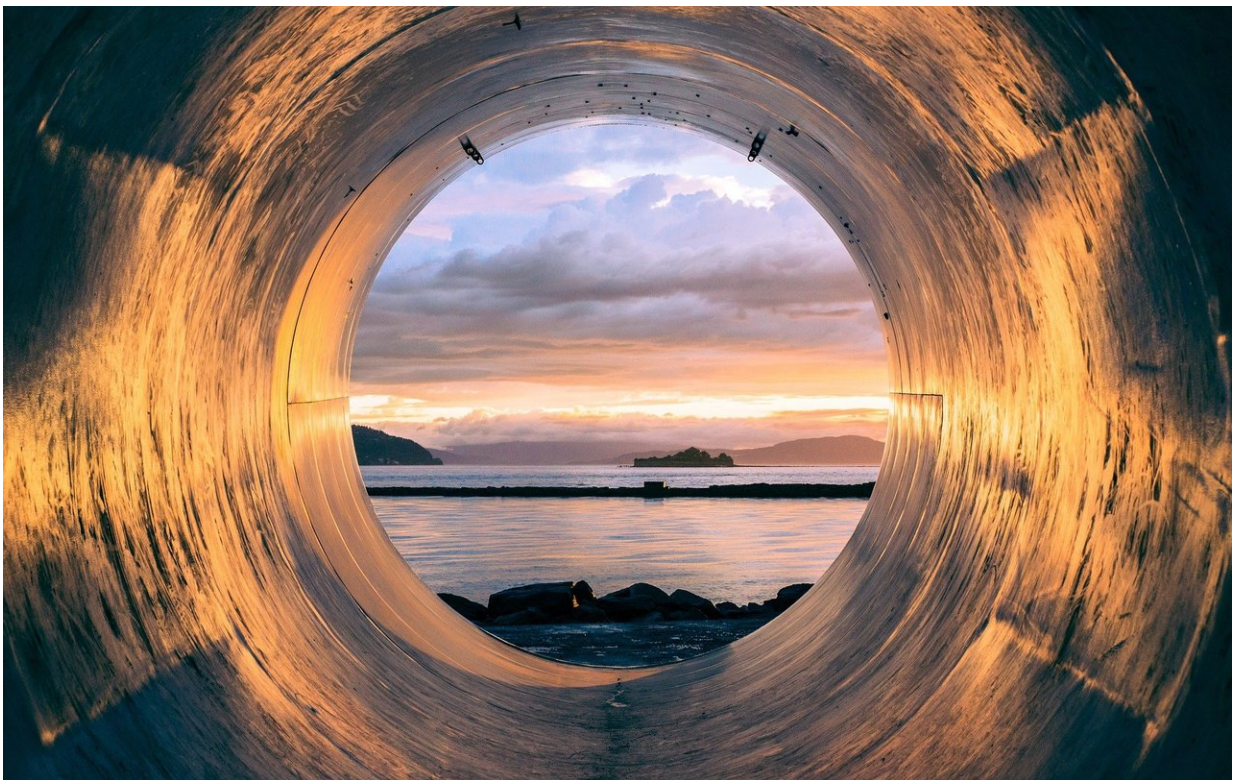


Amid new spills and stink, US senators request millions more to fix Tijuana sewage crisis

August 31 2023, by Tammy Murga, The San Diego Union-Tribune



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California's senators are urging Congress for \$310 million in new emergency spending to fix the rampant sewage pollution that repeatedly flows from Tijuana to San Diego's South County shoreline.

On Tuesday, Senators Alex Padilla and Dianne Feinstein called on Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Senator Patty Murray, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, to include the funds in the upcoming emergency supplemental bill that is already proposing billions for other disaster relief.

The Biden administration has requested \$40 billion in emergency funding, which includes \$24 billion in aid for Ukraine, \$12 billion for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's depleting fund as it responds to disasters like Maui's wildfires, and \$4 billion to address border issues, such as shelter and services for migrants.

In their letter, the Senators said more money to tackle the sewage crisis must be added to that list because it is "fouling California beaches, degrading U.S. Navy readiness, and harming the health of Customs and Border Protection agents, U.S. Coast Guardsmen, and millions of Americans in Southern California."

An additional \$310 million would supplement the \$300 million in [federal money](#) elected leaders and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency previously secured to double the capacity of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plan in San Diego.

The funds would bring efforts closer to covering a \$630-million plan federal environmental regulators in California said would help fix the issue. The strategy, in part, involves installing a pumping system in the Tijuana River to prevent contaminated flows from fouling shorelines as far north as Coronado.

Water from Tijuana has long been sent to the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant or pumped into the Pacific Ocean from Mexico. But Tijuana's faulty system is constantly overwhelmed as its population rises, sending millions of gallons of raw sewage and trash

through the river valley.

Mexico also has a broken wastewater facility in Punta Bandera, about six miles south of the border, which releases more than 30 million gallons of sewage per day into the sea, causing beach closures all along South County. Major upgrades to the San Antonio de Los Buenos treatment plant are expected to kick off this year.

Meanwhile, the hundreds of millions of dollars previously set aside could easily just go toward repairs. The plant will likely need as much as \$150 million for maintenance before it can expand.

"This is so frustrating," said Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre, whose small coastal city has had its shoreline closed since December 2021. "So I think that's great that (the senators) are highlighting the very glaring absence of (funding for this issue) as (the supplemental funding) currently stands."

The Senate Appropriations Committee is expected to consider the emergency supplemental funds next month.

Aguirre has received support from the county, California's legislative and congressional delegation and, most recently, the League of California Cities' San Diego County Division, in her call urging Gov. Gavin Newsom to proclaim the Tijuana sewage pollution an emergency.

Earlier this month, the governor asked President Joe Biden and Congress to immediately free up the \$300 million to repair the treatment plan. He did not declare an emergency, however.

The calls come after Tropical Storm Hilary's remnants resulted in 2.3 billion gallons of untreated wastewater flowing down the Tijuana River, according to the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission.

About 90 percent was rainwater, the agency said. Damage and repair costs following the storm are still being assessed, Morgan Rogers, operations manager for the IBWC in San Diego, said Wednesday.

On Monday, a sewage spill from the Hollister Street pump station near the border seemed to have worsened an already nightmarish situation for South County residents. The IBWC said a buildup of sediment led to more than 20,000 gallons of sewage spilling onto the street, which is near several equestrian and hiking areas.

"We are in the process of repairing or replacing the failed pumps at Hollister pump station, restoring flows from the canyon collectors, and stopping the transboundary flows," the agency said in a Wednesday email. It did not say when the restoration is expected.

Residents in the area and around Imperial Beach have taken to social media to express their frustration over lingering putrid odors, many saying they are losing sleep.

"It's 2:45 a.m. and once again I got (woken) up by a bad smell from outside. And once again got up and closed my window," Susie Wigginton posted on Facebook.

Former Imperial Beach Mayor Serge Dedina said the issue has gotten so bad that he decided last year to move his conservation organization, Wildcoast, out of Imperial Beach and to Del Mar because he and his staff have gotten sick from airborne fecal matter.

Residents are continuing their push to sound the alarm on the urgent need to stop the cross-border water pollution. On Friday, Coronado residents are spearheading a rally on Friday with environmental nonprofits and activists to push the crisis to be declared an emergency. It is scheduled for 4 p.m. at the Coronado Central Beach on G Avenue and

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