

Tijuana River Valley/San Diego Area Transboundary Pollution and Border Water Infrastructure Program

ISSUE SUMMARY:

Sewage-polluted rivers from Mexico entering the U.S. have posed significant economic and environmental impacts on border communities, particularly in San Diego County, CA. In the last several years, over 300 million gallons of raw sewage have flowed into San Diego County due to aging and inadequately funded water infrastructure in Mexico. The problem is severe, and spills have resulted in beach closures in the city of Imperial Beach, San Diego, and Coronado (beaches in Imperial Beach have been closed for almost two years). Congressional members representing border communities, the mayors of Imperial Beach, San Diego, and Coronado, and county supervisors have engaged with EPA to explore technical and financial solutions to the problem.

In January 2020, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) was signed into public law after ratification by Congress. Section 821 of the USMCA charged EPA to carry out the planning, design, construction, and operation and maintenance of high priority treatment works to address this water pollution, in coordination with local stakeholders. The USMCA appropriation included \$300 million for engineering, planning, design, and construction of associated infrastructure.

BACKGROUND:

EPA's Engagement in Water Infrastructure along the U.S.-Mexico Border:

Border Water Infrastructure Program

- EPA has invested in drinking water and wastewater infrastructure along the U.S.-Mexico border (within 62 miles north or south of the border) for more than two decades through the Border Water Infrastructure Program (BWIP).
 - The BWIP is funded annually by Congress and the fiscal year 2024 appropriation was \$30 million, to be split between Region 6 and Region 9. EPA awards these funds in the form of a grant to the North American Development Bank who administers funding to utilities along the border.
 - BWIP-funded projects in Mexico must benefit the U.S. and include a dollar-for-dollar cost-share by Mexico.
- In the 1990's EPA funded the construction of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (ITP), located in San Diego adjacent to the border, that treats sewage exclusively from Tijuana at 25 million gallons per day (mgd). The international treatment plant is owned and operated by the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC).

U.S.-Mexico Canada Agreement (USMCA)

- As part of the USMCA legislation, EPA completed a robust value engineering assessment that identified a suite of projects to holistically address transboundary flows in the Tijuana River watershed.
- In FY 2022, EPA and Mexico signed a Statement of Intent and a Treaty Annex committing \$474 million in short-term projects (EPA: \$330 million and Mexico: \$143M) to improve wastewater infrastructure in the Tijuana watershed.

- On the U.S side, the expansion of the existing International Treatment Plant (ITP) owned and managed by the IBWC was the highest priority project in this binational commitment (expansion from 25mgd to 50mgd).
- On the Mexico side, the construction of a new 18mgd wastewater treatment plant (aka San Antonio de los Buenos or SAB plant) was identified as the highest priority project.
- EPA completed the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) environmental review process in June 2023.
- As part of the ITP expansion assessments, the IBWC identified an additional \$105M needed to rehabilitate the plant prior to expansion and an additional \$620M to expand the plant from 25mgd to 50mgd.
- Despite the significant funding shortfall, EPA and IBWC proceeded with the design and construction in a phased approach, so that additional expansion components could be phased-in based on future funding appropriations.
- The FY24 budget appropriated an additional \$103M to IBWC; much of this will be allocated towards the expansion and construction of public works at the ITP.
- EPA and USIBWC finalized an Interagency Agreement in January 2024 to allow the transfer of USMCA funds to USIBWC for the design and construction of the ITP expansion project.

KEY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS:

Congress Industry States Tribes Media Other Federal Agency
 NGO Local Governments Public

MOVING FORWARD:

- The IBWC is the lead on the ITP expansion project and awarded a Progressive Design-Build contract in August 2024 (construction of the ITP expansion may take 3-4 years).
- Mexico expects to finish construction of the new 18mgd SAB plant by the end of 2024.
- EPA expects to obligate ~\$290M in USMCA funding to the IBWC in the fall, 2024.
- Ongoing sewage flows from Mexico via SAB coastal discharges and the Tijuana River continue to impact beach closures in San Diego County, particularly in Imperial Beach.

LEAD OFFICE: REGION 9

OTHER KEY OFFICES: OW/OP

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