

Two countries, one sewage problem: Tijuana and San Diego grapple with renegade flows

Federal officials in the United States and Mexico announced on Thursday a joint investigation into a sewage spill in the Tijuana River that has polluted South County beaches as far north as Coronado — and which now looks to have been intentional as some elected leaders in San Diego suspected.

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Baja California's governor is preparing to declare a state of emergency in the coming days, hoping to draw financial aid for Tijuana's strained and underfunded sewage system following a massive spill that sent millions of gallons of untreated wastewater from Tijuana across the border and into San Diego last month.

The incident was triggered by the collapse of a major sewage trunk line in Tijuana, state officials say, and repairs led to the release of a large amount of untreated sewage into the Tijuana River channel, which empties into the ocean at [Imperial Beach](#). The spill generated outrage north of the border, especially because of Mexico's failure to notify U.S. officials, who found out only after residents reported foul odors over a two-week period.

Communication "is getting worse," said Serge Dedina, the mayor of Imperial Beach and executive director of the environmental group Wildcoast. "All the

normal things that should be happening to manage the system aren't happening. And we can see this consistent series of breakdowns and lack of notifications.”

The spill has put a spotlight on the need for improvements, even after years of collaboration between the United States and Mexico to minimize the cross-border flow of untreated sewage from Tijuana.

Investments in Tijuana's collection and treatment facilities have gone a long way toward reducing cross-border impacts. Today, contamination is largely contained during dry weather, though rainy weather flows continue to carry sediment and contamination to the river's mouth just north of the border.

But even as authorities plan some major new wastewater projects, critics say there is still much work to be done — and not just in infrastructure. Dedina and others are calling for better communication when such incidents occur. Following last month's incident, one U.S. official initially estimated the spill at 143 million gallons over a 17-day period, while a subsequent estimate suggested it could have been far higher—230 million gallons. But an official with the state-run water utility in Tijuana said in an interview last week that the spill was far smaller and shorter: under 30 million gallons over a four-day period.

Divided by the international border, [San Diego shares a watershed](#) with Tijuana. As a result, any sewage flows from Tijuana's tightly packed colonias that are not captured and sent for treatment risk ending up downstream on [the beaches of southern San Diego County](#).

“We have an international issue with this spill of sewage into the ocean, which is truly sad, and even shameful,” Baja California's governor, Francisco Vega de Lamadrid, said Wednesday.

Vega is expected to declare the state of emergency as early as this week, an action that would make the state utility eligible for different sources of federal and local funding in Mexico to conduct immediate repairs.

Rainy weather always places pressure on Tijuana's subterranean network of sewage pipes, many of them weakened by age and in need of replacement. Officials say that one of the reasons is that many houses in Tijuana are built so that rainwater drains directly into the sewage system. After several years of little precipitation, the system came under much strain in December and January.

“Tijuana is part of a developing country and has [very stretched resources to provide basic infrastructure](#),” said Paul Ganster, a San Diego State University professor who chairs the Good Neighbor Environmental Board, a federal advisory group. “It’s not unexpected to encounter these problems after rains.”

Workers replace a major sewage collector collector that collapsed in central Tijuana, a repair that forced the release of some 30 million gallons of sewage into the Tijuana River, authorities said. (CESPT)

Miguel Lemus, director of the State Public Service Commission in Tijuana, known as CESPT, said his agency urgently needs 72 million pesos — about \$3.6 million — to conduct the repairs on four other sewage trunk lines that also suffered damage. But Tijuana needs far more than that, he said—more than \$40 million over the next year — to perform necessary upgrades to the system.

A new state plan drafted with the collaboration of bilateral organizations is expected to trigger funding for critical sewage infrastructure projects in Tijuana and Rosarito Beach. Foremost is the replacement of Tijuana's [overburdened and failing sewage treatment plant at Punta Bandera](#), which discharges into the Pacific Ocean “raw and treated sewage” that can reach as far north as [Coronado](#), according to a letter this year sent by the

mayors of Imperial Beach, Coronado, Chula Vista and National City and San Diego councilman David Alvarez.

Also a priority in the plan is the construction of a pipeline to collect sewage from coastal communities in Tijuana and Rosarito Beach.

In writing the document, scheduled to be finalized this week, authorities from the state and Mexico's National Water Commission have been collaborating since November with two binational agencies that finance and certify border infrastructure projects: the [North American Development Bank](#) and the [Border Environment Cooperation Commission](#). Much of their funding for Tijuana projects to date has come from the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#), which since 1998 has spent \$42 million on nine projects in the city that have increased wastewater collection, and replaced and repaired failing collectors.

“There's definitely a pro-active approach being taken right now,” said María Elena Giner, the commission's general director.

She said the efforts of the commission and NADBank, created under the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) to address environmental issues on the U.S.-Mexico border, have been key to increasing the wastewater collection in communities on the U.S.-Mexico border, from 26 percent of the population in 1995 to over 90 percent today — among the highest rates in Mexico.

CESPT provides sewage collection service to 89 percent of Tijuana and Rosarito Beach, an area with more than 1.8 million users. All of the sewage collected is treated, through only seven percent of the treated wastewater is recycled, said Lemus, the agency's director; the rest flows into the Pacific Ocean.

CESPT operates a [pump station](#) in the Tijuana River channel whose task is to prevent polluted water from crossing the border during dry weather. But when

Mexico is unable to contain a spill, CESPT is expected to notify the Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas, Mexico's counterpart to the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission.

CESPT has found itself in the hot seat following the most recent spill. In an interview Thursday at CESPT's offices, Lemus acknowledged the agency's failure to follow long-established notification procedures.

At the time, "we were having emergencies all over the city," Lemus said, explaining that workers rushed to respond to calls relating to the storm. "Things got very complicated, and that's why we didn't send out a notice. And we thought the repair would be really quick ... the first day, we should have notified the CILA of the spill."

Lemus said the issue originated with damage to a major sewage trunk line known as "Interceptor Oriente" that lay buried some 40 feet below ground off a busy street in central Tijuana near the confluence of the Tijuana and Alamar river channels.

Workers initially were alerted to a damaged pipe when a road above it buckled in early January. Though broken, the pipe continued to operate and was not spilling sewage, Lemus said. It took a month of digging and analyzing the problem until workers could move to remove the damaged portion and replace it with a new pipe, an operation that lasted from Feb. 1 to Feb. 4.

Lemus said the spill lasted only those four days and totaled under 30 million gallons. While some of the sewage was diverted to another line, much of it ended up in the two concrete channels nearby, flowing toward the border and crossing into San Diego.

But the lack of timely and precise information from CESPT led to [much uncertainty north of the border](#). The U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission initially estimated that the spill totaled 143 million gallons and

lasted from Feb. 6 to Feb. 23. A few days later, U.S. Rep. Scott Peters of San Diego, using a U.S. EPA estimate, [said it could be as high as 230 million gallons.](#)

On the heels of the incident, a binational group made up of government officials and environmentalists from both sides of the border had its initial meeting at CESPT offices on Thursday to [investigate the spill.](#)

Margarita Díaz, executive director of the Tijuana environmental group Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental, is one of the committee members. “It’s complicated problem, and we’re working on a solution, but we need to base our findings on facts,” Díaz said.

The committee is a working group of [Minute 320](#), a 2015 agreement between the United States and Mexico set up to address issues of sediment, trash and pollution in the Tijuana River watershed. By early next month, the group is expected to present its report.

Up to now, communication under Minute 320 “has gone nowhere,” said Dave Gibson, executive officer of the San Diego Regional Quality Control Board. “At times the Mexicans have been very enthusiastic about it, and at times they’ve been very reticent.”

But Steve Smullen, of the International Boundary and Water Commission, said the Minute 320 talks have been fruitful, if slow to develop. “I think we’re making progress,” he said. “There was sort of an emergency and an unfortunate situation that developed, but I think we have pretty good communication overall.”

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