



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

2021 FEB -1 PM 12:32

CLERK OF THE BOARD  
SUPERVISORS

## COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

**VICE CHAIR SUPERVISOR NORA VARGAS**

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

### AGENDA ITEM

**DATE:** February 9, 2021

**11**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

#### **SUBJECT**

**FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: DECLARING POLLUTION AT THE TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

#### **OVERVIEW**

Since 1931, contamination at the Tijuana River Valley has negatively impacted the health of border and coastal communities in San Diego County (County) and our binational region. With this in mind, the County should be assessing environmental issues at the Tijuana River Valley as a public health crisis. This action is long overdue in an area that is faced with poor air quality, sewage leaks, waste from industrial plants, litter of waste-tires that can become breeding sources for disease-carrying mosquitoes, plastic pollution, sediment, and trash. This direct environmental impact coupled with the long-lasting health impact undermines our regions public health.

This Board Letter includes actions for the Board of Supervisors (Board) to publicly and openly acknowledge that the diverse sources of pollution at the Tijuana River Valley pose a public health crisis. Shifting the perspective from a solely environmental concern to a public health crisis makes a statement about our County values, policies, practices, and community priorities to take a holistic approach to solving contamination issues at the Tijuana River Valley.

In declaring pollution at the Tijuana River Valley as a public health crisis, we are acknowledging that the diverse sources of contamination have a direct correlation to health outcomes in our South County and coastal communities. As a public health agency for the region, the County, along with federal, state and other local agencies, has a responsibility to address the issue head on in order to improve the overall health of residents in our binational region. We must all acknowledge that pollution in the Tijuana River Valley extends beyond its environmental impact to a public health concern and affects decisions taken by County Public Health Services.

I strongly urge your support for the recommendations in this letter to ensure that the Board of Supervisors and all subsequent County operations view pollution in the Tijuana River Valley as a public health crisis and further push to improve health outcomes.

**SUBJECT:           FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE: DECLARING POLLUTION AT  
THE TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS  
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

**RECOMMENDATION(S)  
VICE-CHAIR NORA VARGAS**

**1. Declare Pollution at Tijuana River Valley a Public Health Crisis**

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact associated with these recommendations. There may be future fiscal impacts associated with recommendations proposed by the South County Environmental Justice Task Force. Any such recommendations would need to be approved by the Board of Supervisors including allocation of resources in future budgets to achieve the outcomes.

**BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

**ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

**BACKGROUND**

The Tijuana River Valley is part of a large binational watershed of approximately 1,750 square miles that span across the California – Mexico Border. Approximately 75% of the watershed is in the densely urbanized City of Tijuana, Mexico. The watershed flows from South to North and drains into the Tijuana River Estuary in the United States, and ultimately to the Pacific Ocean in the City of Imperial Beach, where water quality is negatively impacted.

As the City of Tijuana has experienced quick population and industrial growth it has simultaneously experienced rapid urbanization, straining the sewage infrastructure. The strained sewage infrastructure has created ongoing sewage problems on both sides of the California – Mexico border. Often, the sewage generated on the Mexico side of the border travels north into California, ending in the Tijuana River Valley. The sewage flows drastically decrease water quality in the Tijuana River Estuary and the adjacent beach coastal waters, posing a significant public health risk to residents and visitors along both sides of the border.

For years, contamination at the Tijuana River Valley has negatively impacted the health of border and coastal communities in San Diego County. With this in mind, the County of San Diego (County) should be assessing environmental issues at the Tijuana River Valley as a public health crisis. This action is long overdue in an area that is faced with poor air quality, sewage leaks, waste from industrial plants, litter of waste-tires that can become a breeding ground for disease-carrying mosquitoes, plastic pollution, sediment and trash. This direct environmental impact coupled with the long-lasting health impact undermines our regions public health. While there have been several efforts to mitigate pollution in the Tijuana River Valley, none of the previous efforts have used a public health lens.

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THE TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS  
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

In declaring pollution at the Tijuana River Valley to be a public health crisis, we will be acknowledging that the diverse sources of contamination have a direct correlation to health outcomes in our South County and coastal communities. As a public health agency for the region, the County, along with federal, state and other local agencies, has a responsibility to address the issue head on in order to improve the overall health of our residents. We must all acknowledge that pollution in the Tijuana River Valley extends beyond its environmental impact to a public health concern and affects decisions taken by County Public Health Services.

One of the biggest challenges in tackling pollution in the Tijuana River Valley has been the lack of U.S. jurisdiction in Mexico, making the development of cooperative binational coordinated within and across governments essential. The U.S. and Mexico sections of the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency are the lead binational agencies responsible for implementing water treaty rights and obligations/minutes between the U.S. and Mexico, including those related to sewage problems and the associated water quality problems in the Tijuana River Watershed. Efforts on both sides of the border have led to the construction and ongoing operation of diversion structures, pump stations and treatment plants to reduce the frequency, volume, and pollutant levels of transboundary sewage flows.


This Board Letter includes actions for the Board of Supervisors to publicly and openly acknowledge that the diverse sources of pollution at the Tijuana River Valley pose a public health crisis. Shifting the perspective from a solely environmental concern to a public health crisis makes a statement about our county values, policies, practices, and community priorities to take a holistic approach to solving contamination issues at the Tijuana River Valley.

While the County has been authorized to use funds from the state for development, improvement, rehabilitation, protection, and restoration of natural and park lands, for specified studies of the Tijuana River Valley, and for the development of a planned campground in the Tijuana River Valley under SB 507, the County has an obligation to our constituents to focus our efforts around the public health impact of the contamination in the watershed.

**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Today's proposed actions support the Live Well San Diego Initiative in the County's Strategic Plan, and its vision for San Diego that is Building Better Health, Living Safely, Thriving, by supporting and empowering frontline communities.

Respectfully submitted,



NORA VARGAS  
Vice Chair, First District

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(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

N/A

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**AGENDA ITEM INFORMATION SHEET**

**REQUIRES FOUR VOTES:**       ☐   Yes   ☒   No

**WRITTEN DISCLOSURE PER COUNTY CHARTER SECTION 1000.1 REQUIRED**  
☐   Yes   ☒   No

**PREVIOUS RELEVANT BOARD ACTIONS:**  
N/A

**BOARD POLICIES APPLICABLE:**  
N/A

**BOARD POLICY STATEMENTS:**  
N/A

**MANDATORY COMPLIANCE:**  
N/A

**ORACLE AWARD NUMBER(S) AND CONTRACT AND/OR REQUISITION  
NUMBER(S):**  
N/A

**ORIGINATING DEPARTMENT:** Supervisorial District One

**OTHER CONCURRENCE(S):**   N/A

**CONTACT PERSON(S):**

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