



★ CALIFORNIA ★

ISSUE BRIEF | AFPI-CALIFORNIA

IMMEDIATE ACTION NEEDED NOW TO CLEAN UP IMPERIAL BEACH'S MAN-MADE ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

Mike Garcia & Richard J. Maher

Imperial Beach, California, is facing a massive environmental crisis. While its shores finally reopened last September after being closed for more than 1,000 days, it still faces intermittent closures ([Anastas, 2024](#)). The reason? Mexico has failed to ensure proper waste management and sewage treatment in Tijuana, leading to massive cross-border pollution that continues to this day ([International Boundary and Water Commission, 2025](#)). At present, 3.4 million gallons of wastewater escape to the Tijuana River per day, flowing across the border and contaminating Imperial Beach. Even worse, willful negligence has led to breakages along the International Collector pipeline, which have led to massive wastewater seepage, and Mexico has, as of mid-March, been unable to locate these fractures.

This crisis is entirely man-made, the result of incompetent leaders at all levels of government who have failed to hold Mexico accountable and have been distracted by ideological crusades entirely unrelated to the environmental catastrophe. Already, it has dealt blows to the region's economy, spoiled San Diego's famously pristine beaches, and even hindered military training for the Navy SEALs and other military personnel at the many military bases in the area. The urgency to resolve this crisis is indisputable.

The failures are not limited to Mexico, however. The Biden Administration failed to distribute appropriated funds meant to address the crisis, leaving critical sewage projects stalled. They also abandoned the Trump-era Arcadis plan, which had already installed pumps that redirected Tijuana's sewage 10 miles south of the border, away from U.S.

waters. This plan was designed to alleviate the overwhelming pollution affecting the coastline and was operational during 2021–2022, significantly improving water quality.

The federal government’s leadership set the stage for the crisis in partnership with poor local leadership. Dr. Maria-Elena Giner, whom President Biden appointed to the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission in 2021, immediately began to prioritize liberal pet projects, such as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and senseless green energy projects instead of addressing Imperial Beach’s environmental disaster ([Votteler, 2024](#)). In fact, while the Biden Administration was undermining the Trump-era plans, Dr. Giner immediately started focusing her efforts on bi-national cooperation with Mexico, not on cleaning up the Tijuana River-generated mess, but instead on “climate change.” While the causes of this contamination were indisputably from Mexico, Dr. Giner resisted attempts to pressure Mexico to resolve the crisis quickly and refused to investigate ongoing infrastructure issues in Tijuana further. That Dr. Giner saw abstract and questionable initiatives as more of a priority than the environmental cleanup reeks of ideology and insensitivity to an urgent crisis undermining the lives and health of the very vulnerable communities she claims to support.

Further, Cheree Peterson at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was no less culpable for this literal and figurative mess. While millions of tons of sewage were pouring into the Pacific Ocean, Peterson oversaw the EPA’s distribution of grants related to recycling and emissions, among others. Instead of grants that could have easily been allocated to remediating Imperial Beach’s contamination, Peterson aggressively pushed questionable support of electric school buses for California public schools. Her reasoning for this allocation ironically was to “create a future where our children can breathe cleaner air” ([Energy Tech, 2024](#)). Yet, if she truly cared about pollution-related health risks, the priorities for her grants would have been radically different. Peterson, who led the EPA’s regional office, also confirmed the agency’s denial to investigate whether the Tijuana River Estuary qualifies as a superfund site, a designation given to the most contaminated places in the country needing long-term cleanup.

While the federal government set the stage for this crisis, local leaders egregiously ignored and even perpetuated it. Indeed, state and local officials also own it. Gov. Gavin Newsom (D-CA) and current Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre sabotaged the Trump Administration’s comprehensive plans, which placed the responsibility squarely on the Mexican government with its ineffective and half-hearted measures. Indeed, out of



a misguided and partisan desire to oppose even common-sense Trump Administration proposals, members of the Imperial Beach City Council, including Mayor Aguirre, [voted against](#) supporting the 2019 Trump Arcadis plan. Gov. Newsom simultaneously proposed SB 507, supported by Aguirre and others, which redirected sewage to be treated to just three miles from Imperial Beach and within U.S. waters ([Port of San Diego, n.d.](#)). Newsom's measures effectively absolved Mexico from the heaving lifting of a crisis they caused and have unnecessarily prolonged it.

San Diego County also bears responsibility as, in concert with several federal agencies, it shockingly approved a 2022 project allowing Mexico to decommission the pipes that had previously carried sewage 10 miles south. As a result, some 35 to 40 million gallons of raw sewage per day crossed over the border into San Diego communities ([California Regional Water Quality Control Board, 2024](#)). These erroneous policies have since led to widespread contamination, frequent beach closures, and serious health risks for residents and visitors alike.

Just as this crisis is not the result of one cause, the solutions must, consequently, be multi-faceted. Fundamentally, Mexico must be held to account for its lack of responsibility for adequately containing and treating its toxic wastewater. Thus far, our state and local leaders have enabled Mexico's fecklessness, proposing only half-hearted measures while sabotaging plans from the first Trump Administration that were already producing tangible results.

To solve this crisis, we recommend that Mexico should first update its outdated wastewater system, which currently fails to prevent untreated sewage from flowing into the Tijuana River and, ultimately, into the Pacific Ocean and U.S. waters. It must invest in modernized sewage treatment while simultaneously implementing stricter waste management regulations.

Second, Mexico must improve its trash management. At present, trash and solid waste clog the city's drainage systems, increasing the likelihood of sewage overflows during heavy rainfall. The lack of trash management currently exacerbates the crisis.

Third, Mexico must establish and maintain clear communication protocols with U.S. agencies in a spirit of transparency. In 2017, the Mexican government failed timely to inform the United States of a broken sewer pipe, leading to at least 256 million gallons of raw sewage during the first seven weeks of that year. U.S. officials must be notified



immediately to render aid and take mitigation measures to protect marine life and public health ([Bruno, 2017](#)).

Finally, the United States must be consistent in implementing proven and effective policies. In addition to exerting increased pressure on Mexico to take responsibility for its wastewater treatment facilities, we should work quickly to improve and modernize our own infrastructure, as outlined in the Arcadis plan. Installing and reactivating the pumps that divert Tijuana's sewage away from the border is essential. Recognizing the symbiotic relationship Tijuana and San Diego have, whatever criticisms the United States has of the Mexican government, means that our aid and guidance in fixing their wastewater system is imperative.

Tragically, the response on the part of the United States under the Biden Administration and that of Mexico have been inadequate and have precipitated these catastrophic environmental results. Our leaders must act quickly and decisively to avoid further damage, exerting pressure on the Mexican government while also collaborating with them to improve Tijuana's infrastructure and prevent more untreated wastewater from contaminating our coast. This action fundamentally means leaving aside partisan biases against effective and proven plans the Trump Administration has advocated and rebuking the current mediocre measurers.



WORKS CITED

Anastas, K. and Castillo, C. (2024, September 23). Most of Imperial Beach shoreline opens to public after lengthy closure. KPBS.
<https://www.kpbs.org/news/environment/2024/09/23/imperial-beach-shoreline-opens-public-after-lengthy-closure>

Bruno, B. (2017, Apr. 6). Lack of Communication Worsened Cross-Border Sewage Spill. *Courthouse News*. <https://www.courthousenews.com/lack-communication-worsened-cross-border-sewage-spill/>

California Regional Water Quality Control Board. (2024, Jan.). Lower Tijuana River Indicator Bacteria and Trash Advance Restoration Plan for Total Maximum Daily Loads. https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/sandiego/water_issues/programs/tmdls/docs/tijuanariver_valley/2024-01-09_draft_tijuana_river_arp.pdf

Energy Tech. (2024, Aug. 29). Zero Carbon Zum: Oakland School District Gains 74 All-Electric Buses. <https://www.energytech.com/emobility/article/55136543/zero-carbon-zum-oakland-school-district-gains-74-all-electric-buses>

International Boundary and Water Commission. (2025, Mar. 14). USIBWC Statement on Transboundary Flows. <https://www.ibwc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/USIBWC-Statement-on-Transboundary-Flows-3-14-2025.pdf>

Port of San Diego. (n.d.) Trust Lands Use Plan.
<https://www.portofsandiego.org/waterfront-development/trust-lands-use-plan>

Votteler, T. (2024, Aug. 2). talk+water: Maria-Elena Giner. *Texas + Water*.
<https://texaspluswater.wp.txstate.edu/2024/08/02/talkwater-maria-elena-giner/>

BIOGRAPHIES

Mike Garcia is the Chair of the California Chapter of the America First Policy Institute.

Richard J. Maher is the Director for State Research at the America First Policy Institute.