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History of Contamination in Imperial Beach, CA

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Historical Background

Imperial Beach (IB) sits at the mouth of the Tijuana River, making it a downstream recipient of cross-border pollution from Mexico. For decades, the city has faced chronic contamination driven by untreated sewage flows from Tijuana and associated industrial and chemical pollutants. The issue dates back to at least the mid-20th century: by the early 1960s, rapid growth in Tijuana had outpaced its sewer infrastructure. Mexico attempted to build a sewage canal toward the coast, but funding ran dry in 1962 – resulting in raw sewage flowing north across the border into the Tijuana River valley and the Pacific Ocean (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). In response, U.S. authorities constructed an emergency pipeline in 1966 to divert Tijuana's sewage to San Diego's treatment plant during infrastructure failures (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). Despite these early measures, cross-border spills became a persistent problem through the 1970s and 1980s, frequently fouling the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve and IB's beaches. Major failures in Tijuana's sewage system routinely sent millions of gallons of waste through the river; for example, winter storms in 1980 broke a Mexican sewer line and unleashed ~15 million gallons per day of sewage through the estuary, forcing health officials to quarantine miles of beach up the coast (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). Such events highlighted the severe public health threat and ecological damage, as coastal waters and wetlands were tainted with human waste, trash, and toxic substances. Residents and researchers have reported brown sewage plumes in the surf zone, tons of garbage deposited in the estuary, and a stark decline in local wildlife (with seals, fish, and birds disappearing from formerly vibrant areas) (California's Most Polluted Beach Is Making Change, but Residents Are Still Suffering the Effects | Pulitzer Center) (California's Most Polluted Beach Is Making Change, but Residents Are Still Suffering the Effects | Pulitzer Center).

The contamination is not only bacterial but also chemical in nature. Untreated wastewater from Tijuana's urban and industrial areas carries a toxic stew of pollutants. Heavy metals (like lead, arsenic, and zinc), volatile chemicals, and pesticides have been detected in the river and coastal sediments after decades of unregulated dumping () (). One study in 2024 identified 170 different pollutants in Tijuana River sediment, including carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and banned pesticides such as DDT, at levels exceeding health thresholds (). Many of these contaminants originate from maquiladoras and other industries in Tijuana that historically discharged waste into the watershed with lax oversight (). This legacy of industrial pollution,

layered atop the ongoing sewage problem, has created a complex environmental crisis. Officials note that the wastewater flows constitute *"a much broader environmental threat"* than just sewage, with hazardous substances embedded in the riverbed and potentially impacting soil, groundwater, and ocean water quality () (). Imperial Beach's contamination issues are thus multi-faceted – stemming from sewage infrastructure failures, cross-border watershed pollution, and accumulation of toxic chemicals over time.

Key Pollution Incidents

Several key incidents and milestones illustrate the history and scale of Imperial Beach's contamination problem:

- 1960s – Cross-Border Sewage Begins: In 1961–1962, Tijuana's partially built sewage canal failed to contain the city's waste. Raw sewage flowed down canyons and across the international border, polluting the Tijuana River valley and Pacific shoreline (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). By 1966, an emergency binational connection was in place to send overflow sewage to San Diego's Point Loma treatment plant during crises (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). This ad-hoc fix marked the first of many stopgap measures.
- 1979–1980 – Major Sewage Spills: Tijuana's main sewage pumping station suffered a major failure in 1979, causing most of the city's wastewater to bypass treatment. The following winter, in January 1980, heavy storms caused a rupture in a sewage line. An estimated 15+ million gallons per day of raw sewage surged through the Tijuana River and estuary into the ocean (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). Imperial Beach and neighboring shorelines were closed for public health; health officials quarantined a 4-mile stretch of coast (reaching north to Coronado) due to dangerously polluted waters (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). These events underscored the need for a long-term solution as spill after spill hit the region in that era.
- 1990s – Binational Treatment Plant Constructed: After years of negotiations, the U.S. and Mexico agreed in 1990 to build a dedicated sewage treatment facility near the border. The South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (SBIWTP) in San Diego's South Bay was authorized in 1990 (costing ~$256 million, mostly U.S.-funded) (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). Construction began in 1994, and by 1999 the plant and a 4.5-mile ocean outfall pipe were completed (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). The plant was designed to treat 25 million gallons per day (MGD) of Tijuana's sewage and discharge the treated effluent offshore in the Pacific (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). This significantly reduced routine dry-weather sewage flows in the 1990s. However, the plant's capacity and uptime proved insufficient over time – peak flows and infrastructure breakdowns continued to send untreated water through the river when the system was overwhelmed or offline.
- **February 2017 – Massive Sewage Spill: In early 2017, an infrastructure failure in Tijuana led to one of the largest single sewage spills on record. Over the course of about two weeks (Feb 6–23, 2017), an estimated 143 million gallons of raw sewage spilled into the Tijuana River upstream in Mexico (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). The contamination poured into the Pacific, polluting beaches from Imperial Beach north to Coronado. Residents reported foul odors and illness, and the incident drew widespread media attention and outrage. It highlighted that despite the binational plant, major breakdowns were still occurring, releasing enormous volumes of waste.

- 2018–2020 – Escalating Crisis and Legal Action: Chronic pollution continued unabated, and water quality at Imperial Beach hit new lows. By 2018, after repeated incidents of sewage and even chemical discharges, local governments took action. The City of Imperial Beach (joined by the City of Chula Vista and the Port of San Diego) filed a lawsuit in 2018 against the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) for failing to stop the cross-border flows (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). Around the same time, the Surfrider Foundation and other environmental groups also sued or petitioned for relief, fed up with ongoing violations of clean water standards (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). In winter 2019 and 2020, heavy rains again flushed huge volumes of contaminated runoff through the Tijuana River. In response, the U.S. Congress in 2020 appropriated $300 million (under the USMCA trade agreement) to fund infrastructure to curb Tijuana River pollution (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). Yet beach closures continued regularly – in fact, IB beaches were off-limits due to pollution for 295 days in 2020 alone (Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol - PMC).
- 2022 – Settlement and Binational Agreement: Years of advocacy and legal pressure yielded some progress by 2022. In April 2022, Imperial Beach and other plaintiffs reached a settlement with the U.S. IBWC, in which federal authorities committed to new mitigation measures for the sewage and chemical pollution (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). That same year, the U.S. and Mexico announced a formal binational plan (IBWC Minute 328) to invest in pollution control projects on both sides of the border (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). The agreement includes expanding the South Bay treatment plant's capacity (planned to double to ~50 MGD) and building new infrastructure to capture and treat flows in the Tijuana River watershed (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). This marked a turning point toward implementing long-term fixes.
- 2023 – Record-Breaking Pollution and Emergency Measures: In 2023, the situation reached an alarming peak. Unusually heavy winter rains (particularly a January storm) produced the highest one-day volume of sewage-tainted flow through the river since 1993 (This is 'on the level of the Flint water crisis,' warn advocates at California's southern border - Western City Magazine). Over the year, an estimated 40 *billion* gallons of polluted water crossed into the U.S. – four times the volume seen the previous year (This is 'on the level of the Flint water crisis,' warn advocates at California's southern border - Western City Magazine). Imperial Beach's shoreline was essentially continuously contaminated; by mid-2023 the city's beaches had been closed for over 1,000 consecutive days (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California), a grim milestone making IB home to some of the most chronically polluted beaches in the U.S. (California's Most Polluted Beach Is Making Change, but Residents Are Still Suffering the Effects | Pulitzer Center). The extreme conditions in 2023 prompted local officials to escalate calls for help – San Diego County declared a public health emergency, and officials at city, county, and federal levels urged California's governor and the U.S. President to declare a state of emergency to expedite response efforts (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media) (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media).

Government and Environmental Responses

Binational Treaties and Infrastructure: Addressing Imperial Beach's pollution has required cooperation between U.S. and Mexican authorities. Under a 1944 treaty and subsequent agreements (such as IBWC Minute 283), Mexico has the primary responsibility to prevent sewage from reaching the U.S., while the U.S. is tasked with providing backup infrastructure to capture any cross-border flows (Sewage Pollution within the Tijuana River Watershed | San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board). In practice, this meant building facilities on the U.S. side to intercept and treat Tijuana's wastewater. The flagship project was the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (SBIWTP), completed in the late 1990s as a joint effort (funded mostly by the U.S.) (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News) (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). The plant, located in San Ysidro just north of the border, was designed to treat 25 MGD of sewage piped from Tijuana and discharge the effluent 3+ miles offshore. Additional "canyon collector" systems were built in five border canyons (Stewart's Drain, Smuggler's Gulch, Goat Canyon, etc.) to catch smaller dry-weather flows seeping across the border and pump them to the plant (Sewage Pollution within the Tijuana River Watershed | San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board) (Sewage Pollution within the Tijuana River Watershed | San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board). These measures initially helped reduce pollution, but they were not foolproof. Over the years, lack of maintenance and under-sizing of infrastructure eroded their effectiveness. Imperial Beach officials note that the SBIWTP has "often not been fully operational" due to deferred maintenance and historically poor management, and it cannot handle the sheer volume of transboundary flows in major events (). When the plant is overwhelmed or broken down, sewage simply flows untreated through the river or coastal estuaries. Even in the best case, the plant never had capacity to treat the 40+ MGD of sewage-laden water that can flow daily in the Tijuana River during routine conditions ().

Upgrades and Remediation Projects: In recent years, governments have launched new initiatives to confront the crisis. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), given $300 million by Congress in 2020, worked with the IBWC on a comprehensive plan to expand treatment and diversion capabilities. By mid-2022, the U.S. and Mexico agreed on a suite of projects: chief among them, doubling the capacity of the South Bay plant (from 25 MGD to 50 MGD) and building a large diversion structure to capture contaminated river flows and pump them to treatment (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). Subsequent federal budgets in 2023–2024 earmarked even more funds – in total, over $700 million in U.S. federal funding has now been secured to fully repair and expand wastewater infrastructure in the border region (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). This includes fixing aging pumps and pipes, adding new treatment facilities, and upgrading Mexico's sewage systems. On the Mexican side, under IBWC Minute 328, projects are underway to improve Tijuana's sewer lines and rehabilitate the San Antonio de los Buenos treatment plant (Punta Bandera), which has long dumped insufficiently treated waste into the ocean south of IB () (). Mexican authorities are installing new pumps and restoring capacity so that less sewage is discharged directly into the Tijuana River and coastal waters.

At the state and local level, numerous remediation and mitigation efforts have been pursued. California formed the Tijuana River Valley Recovery Team years ago to coordinate multi-agency cleanup in the valley. Since 2019, the State of CA has allocated about $35 million in state funds for projects to improve conditions (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California) (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). This includes building and

operating trash and sediment capture basins in key canyon tributaries (e.g. a $9 million project in Goat Canyon) to intercept the tons of debris and contaminated silt carried by floodwaters (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). Sediment basins and trash booms help protect the Tijuana Estuary by catching rubbish and polluted sediments before they spread (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). California has also funded habitat restoration and flood control projects (such as the Smuggler's Gulch Improvements) to repair ecological damage (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). Recognizing the public health dimension, San Diego County and the state installed air quality monitors and provided air purifiers for residents after finding that sea breeze and riverbed gases were carrying sewage stink and possibly aerosolized bacteria inland (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California) (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). By 2023, local authorities (including the County of San Diego and IB's mayor) declared local states of emergency and appealed for state/federal emergency status to fast-track projects (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media) (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media). These requests are aimed at cutting red tape for construction of the new Tijuana River diversion and treatment system, which officials say could reduce beach closure days by roughly 60% once completed ().

Environmental organizations and community groups have been heavily involved as well. Groups like San Diego Coastkeeper and Surfrider Foundation launched public awareness campaigns (e.g. "Clean Border Water Now") and volunteer cleanup events to remove trash from beaches. They have also gathered data on water quality, documenting frequent violations of health standards. In fact, water samples off Imperial Beach have detected sewage-borne pathogens like hepatitis A virus, bacteria, and even SARS-CoV-2 genetic material – clear evidence of untreated waste in the surf zone (Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol - PMC) (Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol - PMC). This citizen and scientific data has bolstered the case for urgent action. In summary, the government response has evolved from short-term fixes (pumps, pipes) to a more comprehensive strategy combining infrastructure upgrades, environmental remediation, and binational collaboration. As one California official put it, after "far too long" of inaction, the recent funding and projects *"mark a long-term turning point"* toward giving Imperial Beach the clean water and environment it deserves (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California) (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California).

Legal Actions and Regulatory Measures

Legal pressure has been a driving force in addressing Imperial Beach's pollution. After decades of repeated contamination, 2018 saw a watershed moment: Imperial Beach (along with Chula Vista and the Port of San Diego) sued the U.S. section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC), arguing that the agency violated the Clean Water Act by allowing millions of gallons of sewage and hazardous waste to routinely spill over the border (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). This lawsuit, filed in U.S. federal court, accused IBWC of failing to fulfill its duties to capture and treat transboundary flows. It was soon followed by additional lawsuits from other affected parties – the City of San Diego filed its own suit, and the Surfrider Foundation and San Diego Coastkeeper also took legal action,

representing environmental and surfer communities (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). These cases were eventually consolidated, putting significant pressure on the federal government. In 2019, the Regional Water Quality Control Board (a California state regulator) also issued cease-and-desist orders and fines to IBWC for numerous pollution violations, documenting hundreds of instances where contaminated flows exceeded permitted levels (Environmental Groups Sue Federal Government to Spur Action in ...). Essentially, by 2019 multiple agencies and organizations were leveraging the courts and regulatory system to force a solution.

The legal battles yielded results by 2022. In April 2022, the plaintiffs (cities and environmental groups) reached a settlement agreement with the USIBWC. Under the settlement, IBWC committed to specific remedial actions: it agreed to prioritize infrastructure fixes, improve capture of sewage in the canyon collector system, and work with the EPA on the planned plant expansion (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News). This settlement dovetailed with the announcement of new funding (the $300 million from Congress) and the U.S.-Mexico Minute 328 plan – effectively turning the lawsuits into a cooperative path forward. In light of these developments, the federal judge put a hold on the litigation to allow the remediation projects to proceed. California regulators, meanwhile, kept up oversight: the San Diego Water Board imposed stricter NPDES permit requirements on the South Bay plant, requiring IBWC to report all spills and meet maintenance deadlines (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). By holding the federal facility to account (e.g. mandating pump replacements, pipeline repairs, and other upgrades on a set schedule), the state aimed to prevent the "deferred maintenance" problems that contributed to past failures (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California).

In addition to lawsuits against the IBWC (the federal agency), attention has also turned to the private operator contracted to run the treatment plant. In October 2024, a group of Imperial Beach residents filed a mass-action lawsuit against Veolia Water North America, the company responsible for operating and maintaining the South Bay International plant. The suit accuses Veolia of gross mismanagement and negligence leading to infrastructure breakdowns that allowed sewage to leak into the environment (French Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator Blasted Over Filth in Tijuana River | Singleton Schreiber). Lawyers for the residents claim that Veolia's failures contributed to incidents like a major sewage spill in 2022, and that as a result fecal bacteria, heavy metals, and banned chemicals were discharged into the river and ocean, harming marine life (dolphin and fish die-offs were noted) (French Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator Blasted Over Filth in Tijuana River | Singleton Schreiber). This novel case uses California's public nuisance laws to seek damages and prompt better maintenance. It reflects the community's frustration and willingness to hold *all* responsible parties accountable – not just government agencies but also contractors.

Beyond litigation, Imperial Beach leaders have advocated for higher-level remedies. In 2023–2024, city and county officials urged that the Tijuana River Valley be designated a federal Superfund site (under CERCLA) due to the extensive toxic contamination in the riverbed () (). A presentation to the San Diego County Board of Supervisors in October 2024 argued that the situation meets Superfund criteria, citing studies finding hazardous substances like PAHs, pesticides, and industrial chemicals at dangerous levels in river sediments (). If granted, a Superfund status could bring additional federal resources and a comprehensive cleanup of legacy pollution. As of early 2025, this proposal is under review. Meanwhile, the border pollution crisis has drawn bipartisan political attention – San Diego's congressional representatives and state lawmakers have repeatedly written to the White House and California governor, imploring emergency action (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for

state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media) (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media). These legal and political efforts underscore that the contamination of Imperial Beach is not just a local nuisance, but a cross-border environmental justice issue that demands sustained enforcement and oversight.

Current Status and Ongoing Concerns

Present-Day Conditions: Imperial Beach continues to grapple with the aftermath of decades of pollution even as fixes are in progress. As of 2024–2025, water quality at IB's beaches remains extremely poor after rainstorms and often fails health standards even in dry weather. Beach closure signs ("Sewage Contamination – Keep Out") have become a fixture, and the shoreline was closed for over 1,000 days in total by 2024 (California's Most Polluted Beach Is Making Change, but Residents Are Still Suffering the Effects | Pulitzer Center). The public health department warns that bacteria levels are still at dangerous highs during pollution episodes (California's Most Polluted Beach Is Making Change, but Residents Are Still Suffering the Effects | Pulitzer Center). Residents have adapted by avoiding contact with the ocean water and estuary; a whole generation is growing up unable to safely swim or surf in their local beach on many days. The pollution has also affected the economy and quality of life – fishing along the pier has declined (catches are often too contaminated to eat) (California's Most Polluted Beach Is Making Change, but Residents Are Still Suffering the Effects | Pulitzer Center) (California's Most Polluted Beach Is Making Change, but Residents Are Still Suffering the Effects | Pulitzer Center), and Navy SEAL teams that historically trained in IB's waters have had to relocate due to the unsanitary conditions (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). These ongoing impacts have cemented Imperial Beach's reputation as "California's most polluted beach", a title no community wants.

On a more hopeful note, major remediation projects are finally moving from planning to implementation. The U.S. EPA, IBWC, and Mexican authorities are collaborating on a suite of infrastructure upgrades slated for completion by the mid-to-late 2020s. The expansion of the South Bay International plant to 50 MGD is in the engineering phase (with $560+ million in U.S. funds allocated specifically to that plant's rehab and expansion) (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). In parallel, the EPA has proposed a new Tijuana River Diversion structure near the border that will capture and divert up to 100 MGD of polluted river flows during storms, which can then be treated (some on the U.S. side, and excess possibly sent to an expanded plant in Mexico) (). If built, this system is projected to dramatically reduce the volume of sewage reaching the ocean via the river (local officials estimate it could cut IB beach closure days by about 60% once operational) (). Mexico's government, under the framework of Minute 328, has several projects underway expected to reduce dry-weather sewage flows by repairing broken infrastructure in Tijuana. Notably, the San Antonio de los Buenos coastal treatment plant – which historically dumped about 25-30 MGD of partially treated sewage into the Pacific – is being rehabilitated, aiming to stop those discharges that often drift north into U.S. waters (). By fixing pumps and expanding sewage collection in Tijuana, Mexican authorities hope to contain more waste on their side of the border.

Despite these efforts, significant environmental concerns persist. Even if the sewage flows are better controlled in coming years, there is the issue of contaminated sediments and groundwater in the Tijuana River Valley. Toxic substances that accumulated over decades (including heavy metals and organic toxins) remain in the soil and river bottom – and they can become mobile during floods or even as dry dust. Scientists worry that extreme storm events (which are becoming more frequent with climate change) could scour the riverbed and flush out

these buried contaminants, undoing some remediation work () (). Another emerging concern is airborne exposure: Recent research by Scripps Institution of Oceanography confirmed that polluted seawater can transfer bacteria and chemicals into the air via sea-spray aerosol, meaning coastal residents might inhale microscopic particles of sewage-born toxins (Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol - PMC) (Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol - PMC). In 2023, monitors near the IB/Tijuana River area detected elevated levels of noxious gases (like hydrogen sulfide) coming from the stagnant sewage in the river valley (). These gases caused symptoms in nearby residents and Border Patrol agents, prompting the county to deploy hazardous materials teams and adding urgency to calls for an emergency declaration (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media) (Cross-border sewage: Officials call for state of emergency amid toxic gas concerns | KPBS Public Media). Local leaders have described the situation as a public health crisis "on the level of the Flint water crisis", to quote one Surfrider advocate, emphasizing the severity of long-term exposure to the pollution (This is 'on the level of the Flint water crisis,' warn advocates at California's southern border - Western City Magazine).

In summary, Imperial Beach's contamination problems have been a century in the making, and while major investments and binational cooperation are finally underway, the community is still in the midst of the fight. Government agencies are in the process of constructing infrastructure that, by late 2020s, should substantially alleviate the sewage overflow issues. Official estimates say that with full implementation of planned projects, the cross-border sewage volume will drop significantly, leading to cleaner water and fewer beach closures () (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). As of early 2025, the U.S. Congress and California have committed unprecedented funding (over $700 million federal and additional state dollars) to see these projects through (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California) (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California). However, until those fixes come online, Imperial Beach remains vulnerable to pollution with each rainfall and infrastructure failure. The legacy contamination in the river valley will likely require further cleanup (possibly even Superfund-scale remediation) to fully restore the ecosystem () (). Residents, advocacy groups, and local officials continue to push hard for accountability and speed, refusing to accept that polluted water and toxic exposure should be a way of life in their community. The situation in Imperial Beach is improving slowly, but it remains an ongoing environmental concern and a stark reminder of the challenges of managing transboundary pollution.

Sources: Official reports and communications from Imperial Beach and San Diego County (Tijuana River Pollution | Imperial Beach, CA) (); historical records compiled by local news and historical societies (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News) (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News); scientific studies (e.g. Scripps Institution/UCSD) on water and air contamination (Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol - PMC) (Bacterial and Chemical Evidence of Coastal Water Pollution from the Tijuana River in Sea Spray Aerosol - PMC); California State and U.S. federal government press releases and funding announcements (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California) (California secures critical funding to address Tijuana River sewage crisis in Imperial Beach and surrounding communities | Governor of California); news coverage and investigative reports detailing the sewage spills, legal actions, and community impacts (Promises, Promises: The Tijuana sewage crisis timeline – The Coronado News) (This is 'on the level of the Flint water crisis,' warn advocates at California's southern border - Western City Magazine). All evidence points to a long-standing

pollution crisis that is finally being confronted through concerted binational remediation efforts, even as Imperial Beach advocates remain vigilant about the health of their shoreline and community.