

March 22, 2017

TITLE: Surfrider's No Border Sewage Policy

Executive Summary of February 2017 Sewage Spill

In mid-February 2017 Imperial Beach residents began reporting visible sewage and stench in the vicinity. On Feb. 24, 2017, the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) in San Diego officially reported a sewage spill to local leaders. 143 million gallons of Tijuana's raw sewage had been discharged into Imperial Beach from Feb. 6 to 23. By March 2017 the estimated sewage contamination increased to 230 million gallons of raw sewage.

On March 2, 2017 the Binational Core Group (BCG) established by Minute 320 convened in Tijuana to discuss the sewage spill. The BCG contained representative from the United States, Mexico and nonprofits organizations on both sides of the border. At this meeting, CESPT (Mexican water authority) and CILA (IBWC's Mexican counterpart) explained that the sewage resulted from a broken collector pipe caused by excessive rain. They estimated that the spill lasted a period of 4 days and resulted in a raw sewage contamination of 300 litres per second. Therefore, according to Mexican authorities, the sewage spill was no more than 28 million gallons over the course of 4 days.

Both the IBWC and CILA agreed to investigate and report findings in 30 days. These reports are expected to be released at the beginning of April 2017.

Imperial Beach residents have been both angered and motivated by this last sewage spill. Sewage spills are commonplace in Imperial Beach. As a result of this last incident, residents have formed two groups: The IB Clean Water Movement and Stop the Poop. Both groups appear to be active in letter writing, advocacy, and information dissemination.

Health

The US estimate of contamination with respect to this last contamination varies from 143 – 240 million gallons of raw sewage. Even taking the lowest estimate, this is the largest spill of raw sewage in a decade. Raw sewage in the ocean poses an unacceptable risk to humans, wildlife, and the environment. This is especially true with this last incident considering that the public was not notified of the contamination until 02/24/2017 – more than two weeks into the spill.

Since the spill, Imperial Beach residents exposed to the contaminated water and contaminated air have complained of the following: wheezing, hacking coughs, bronchial issues in seniors, watering eyes, allergy-like symptoms, and flu-like symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhea. Furthermore, a review of the most recent Quality of Life Dashboard (2016) prepared by the Equinox Center indicates that children in Imperial Beach generally suffer from high rate of asthma.

In the month since the sewage leak, dead and sick animals have been found on the beach. This is of concern because Imperial Beach is frequented by fisherman and is home to many species of rare birds.

Policy Objectives and Implementation:

The border sewage problem has long existed in Imperial Beach and Coronado. However, the problem worsened over the last 50 years as Tijuana's population increased beyond the city's capacity to respond with adequate infrastructure. Border sewage from Tijuana is a routine occurrence in Imperial Beach as are regular beach closures. Surfrider's No Border Sewage Committee recognizes the dangers posed and endeavors to work with public agencies and other non-profits organizations to avoid future sewage spill contamination.

Upon a review of a decade's worth of news and media coverage on border sewage in Imperial Beach, several themes continually reoccurred:

1. Raw sewage contamination is most likely to occur during periods of heavy rain.
2. Public notification of contamination fails to occur because of regular "breakdown(s) in communication."
3. The Tijuana sewer/wastewater management system is failing.
4. Little has been done to remediate reoccurring problems.

As such, Surfrider supports the following policy objectives:

- 1. The development of policies that would ensure a regular system of communication with respect to water quality, contamination, and sewer works between the IBWC and CILA (IBWC's Mexican counterpart)**

Based on previous incidents, known deficiencies in the Tijuana sewer system and weather patterns, it is likely that another sewage spill will occur. There appears to be minimal communication between both sides of the border. In order to ensure that this sort of miscommunication does not happen again with the next sewage spill and to ensure accountability, Surfrider supports a new minute order of the IBWC that would outline and require a daily communication and exchange of information with respect to water quality and sewer system updates.

The silence from authorities on both sides of the border is unacceptable. Their inaction has put the health of our communities at risk. The current minute 320 of the IBWC sets up a Binational Core Group to prioritize and collaborate with respect to border sewage. However, Minute 320 lacks an enforcement mechanism or accountability directive.

Surfrider will collaborate with the IBWC San Diego and CILA to this end. Surfrider will continue to advocate before the: Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); Imperial Beach Mayor Serge Dedina; Imperial Beach City Council; Regional Water Quality Control Board; Imperial Beach Public Works Department; Wildcoast; and the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana.

- 2. Support the expansion and frequency of water quality testing by the IBWC and the City of San Diego.**

The IBWC and the City of San Diego conduct weekly testing of water samples. However, given the gravity of the health concern and the most recent amount of raw sewage leaked, there is a very strong need for more regular and extensive testing. Surfrider recommends the following expansion:

1. Daily water testing

2. Testing of the sand
3. Expanding current testing to look for salmonella, flesh-eating bacteria, hepatitis and giardia.
4. A quicker turnover of water testing results and dissemination of information.

In order to achieve this end, Surfrider will advocate to the IBWC San Diego and its Mexican counterpart CILA. Surfrider should also contact the following to garner support: the Environmental Protection Agency; Imperial Beach Mayor Serge Dedina; Imperial Beach City Council; Regional Water Quality Control Board; Imperial Beach Public Works Department; Wildcoast; and the City of San Diego.

3. Promote the development of a plan that will address Mexico's deficient infrastructure issue and the environmental impact it has on local beaches.

There is a need to openly address Mexico's failing infrastructure with concrete, measurable, and actionable solutions because this has health and economic impacts. Surfrider looks forward to engaging with public entities to discuss all feasible solutions with the end goal of working collaboratively to reach necessary funding goals. There are various ideas available to eliminate sewage flows into the ocean and Surfrider strives to support the exploration of these aggressively.

4. Advocate for the use of Federal and State resources to stop sewage discharges in the Tijuana River as a result of Tijuana's waste water management issues.

Surfrider supports the use of Federal and State resources to address and eliminate the sewage, trash, sediment and chemical waste that plagues our ocean, waves and beaches in the border region. The current system is failing and the infrastructure in Mexico is deficient. Much of the aggravation and lack of action has resulted from the fact that Imperial Beach has been alone in attempting to solve this problem which at its core is an international problem.

In order to achieve this end, Surfrider will advocate before Environmental Protection Agency, Governor Jerry Brown, Senators Diane Feinstein and Kamala Harris, and Representatives Juan Vargas and Scott Peters. Surfrider continues to support the North American Development Bank Plan and also proposes attaching this issue to the pending renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA).