

USIBWC Citizens Forum  
Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve  
March 2, 2017  
Imperial Beach, California

**Board Members in Attendance**

Rick van Schoik, North American Research Partnerships  
Ed Spriggs, City of Imperial Beach  
Roger Kube, Surfrider  
Paola Avila, Chamber of Commerce  
Marisa Quiroz, International Community Foundation  
Stewart Halpern, Coastkeeper

**USIBWC Staff in Attendance:**

Steve Smullen, Area Operations Manager, USIBWC

**Welcoming Remarks:**

At 6:30 PM, Steve Smullen, USIBWC Area Operations Manager and Citizens Forum co-chair convened the meeting. He welcomed the group, and asked the Board Members to introduce themselves. There were approximately 120 members of the public at the Citizens Forum because a spill notice had been filed the previous week by USIBWC for 143 million gallons of wastewater discharged to the Tijuana River in Mexico.

Steve Smullen read a USIBWC press release announcing formation of a binational task force to investigate the spill; he then provided a brief summary of details surrounding the spill.

The United States and Mexican Commissioners of the International Boundary and Water Commission, United States and Mexico, have agreed to investigate a transboundary sewage spill at San Diego, California-Tijuana, Baja California that was reported in February 2017. The investigation will determine when the spill occurred, quantify how much sewage spilled, specify the characteristics of the sewage, and identify problems in procedures to notify the Commission and the public.

The Commissioners agreed to investigate the matter after receiving reports about sewage originating in Mexico that affected the Tijuana River, Tijuana River Estuary, and coastal waters at Imperial Beach, California. The U.S. Section of the Commission informed U.S. agencies of the information it had received from Mexican authorities but the duration of the spill and volume have not been confirmed.

Several elected officials were acknowledged to make statements.

Mayor Serge Dedina of Imperial Beach spoke first. Mayor Dedina said the Citizens Forum board were on the residents' side. He stated that the best action would be to work together and write or call elected officials to support resources for Mexico to improve their system, specifically mentioning aging infrastructure and the treatment plant at San Antonio de los Buenos. He believed funding through the Border Environment Cooperation Commission/North American Development Bank (BECC/NADB) would be secured soon for those projects.

Mark West, Councilman with Imperial Beach, gave some brief comments in the same vein as Mayor Dedina.

Mr. Smullen introduced Cory Schumacher, Board of Supervisors member from Carlsbad, who grew up in Imperial Beach. She is a twice longboard surfing champion. She stated that this issue was of great concern to her and mentioned her cousin who almost lost his sight from a bacterial infection from surfing

in the ocean off Imperial Beach.

We received the list of speakers and asked that the speakers limit their comments to 2 minutes in length.

**The following is a list of speakers.**

Baron Partlow, resident  
Scott Ridout, Surfrider  
Dante Paminthan, local real estate agent  
Paul Spear  
Bryan Brillhart, local resident  
Linda Heath  
Stephanie Pate, local resident  
John DeTommaso, local resident  
Shawna Chalmers, local resident  
Liz Forsyth-Love II, local resident  
Liz Ireland, local resident  
Steve Wykoff, local resident  
Veronica Archer, local resident  
Larry Sayjohn, local resident  
Alma Warner, local resident  
Stewart Gentry, local resident  
Tom Sommers, local resident  
Ted Patrick, local resident  
Paula Lepak, local resident  
Cynthia Gorham, California Regional Water Quality Control Board  
Brian Bilbray, local resident  
Steven Wright, Four Walls International.  
Raquel Maden representing Senator Ben Hueso's office  
Bill Sandke, Councilman from City of Coronado  
Stephanie Allan, Congressman Juan Vargas' Office  
Victor Avila, County of San Diego, Office of Supervisor Greg Cox  
Juan Bribiesca, local resident

The individuals provided comments on the reported spill, many in heated, angry or emotional tones. Many stated that this pollution is a chronic problem that has been going on for decades and wanted to know why nothing has been done about it. Some residents had specific concerns with health impacts to children. Several residents spoke of the impacts to local wildlife, including birds. One speaker said this was a deliberate and intentional biological terrorist act on the part of Mexico.

About halfway during the public comment period, Roberto Espinosa of the IBWC Mexican Section, provided comments and spoke in Spanish, with Oscar Romo translating. He described the conditions of the Tijuana wastewater infrastructure. Due to the difficult terrain and many canyons, and the fact that the sewer system receives a significant amount of infiltration during rain events, the sewer system becomes a pressurized system which results in accelerated internal erosion of pipelines. This event was the result of a significant infrastructure failure that needed emergency repairs made quickly. He lamented the discharge of untreated wastewater to the river and felt ashamed that Mexico did not provide adequate notice of the bypass.

One resident said she felt lost and wanted to know who to contact. Roger Kube of Surfrider, mentioned there was a draft letter on the Surfrider website that people could click on and send to their elected officials. Ed Spriggs offered to send the link to the attendees.

Cynthia Gorham, California Regional Water Quality Control Board, read a letter from David Gibson, Executive Officer of the Regional Board, which was addressed to the IBWC Commissioners with his observations and recommendations for future work.

Brian Bilbray took the opportunity to state that he felt that the City of Imperial Beach should be receiving a waiver from the Regional Board for storm water fees. It just did not make sense that the City should be paying this when the Tijuana River discharges enormous volumes of contaminated water during runoff events.

Stephanie Allan and Victor Avila provided statements that both Congressman Vargas and Supervisor Cox were committed to working with their constituents and agencies to channel energy in a positive direction.

Following the speakers, Mr. Smullen announced that Oscar Romo would provide his presentation but that the presentation by Dr. Carrillo would be postponed until the next meeting due to time constraints. Dr. Carrillo graciously offered to return for the June 1 meeting.

### **Presentation One—Tracking Study of Solid Waste that Flows Across the U.S.-Mexico Border**

Oscar Romo, Director of Alter Terra and Professor at the University of California at San Diego, discussed the trash tracking project that provided a scientific basis for knowledge on origins and final disposition of the flow of transboundary solid waste. This enabled the City of Tijuana to provide more than \$1M pesos to clean up trash from canyons. Included in the work, which was funded through various sources, were preparation of maps of sub-basins in Tijuana, location of illicit trash dumps and location of sediment basins that are traps for debris. Dr. Romo spoke about additional grant funding that has enabled Alter Terra to plan and design (and eventually construct) 3 trash booms in Smugglers Gulch between the border and Monument Road. The booms were designed with input from local high school students, and will be constructed of repurposed or recycled materials. Dr. Romo stated that he had success with installation of these types of booms in Guatemala.

### **Questions and Answers:**

**Question:** One resident asked about the possibility of recycling in Mexico.

**Answer:** Oscar stated that this had a lot of potential but needed development in Tijuana. In the study on trash tracking, women were paid to collect and shred bottles.

**Question:** A student asked where fresh water comes from?

**Answer:** Fresh water is always made available to Tijuana residents. The ultimate source for most of Tijuana is the Colorado River. There are challenges but there are ways to achieve success with environmental enhancement projects.

**Question:** One resident asked if there was a way to provide money for a waste management system so that people would not have to live like this.

**Answer:** Oscar stated that BECC /NADB is a great source of funding and is anti -corruption by its nature. The funding is allocated in a systematic way and tracked.

**Question:** One attendee asked if the individuals who helped work on this project are residents who were genuinely concerned- or are they activists?

**Answer:** Dr. Romo stated that the people involved in the cleanups are local people that feel directly responsible for trash polluting the Estuary; which is why they are so energized to clean things up. Marisa Quiroz, International Community Foundation mentioned this is supported by the fact that there are far more volunteers in Tijuana River Action Month (TRAM) events on the Mexico side than the US side. This past year there were 300 volunteers in the U.S. and over 2000 volunteers in Mexico.

Suggestions for new topics at future CF meetings included:

- 1) The presentation on Minute 319/320 by Dr. Carrillo of the International Community Foundation
- 2) Update on the forthcoming report on the spill that was a major concern to those attending the meeting.
- 3) The next CF meetings are scheduled for June 1, September 7 and December 7.

Due to time constraints and the lengthy statements from residents, the meeting was adjourned without any additional Board Member or attendee comment.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:20 pm.

\*Meeting notes are tentative and summarize in draft the contents and discussion of Citizens Forum Meetings. While these notes are intended to provide a general overview of Citizens Forum Meetings, they may not necessarily be accurate or complete, and may not be representative of USIBWC policy or positions.