

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 9, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States of America  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C., 20500

The Honorable Gavin Newsom  
Governor  
State of California  
1021 O Street, Suite 9000  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Colleague:

We write to reiterate our request for a State of Emergency in light of new findings that alarming levels of noxious gas are emanating from the Tijuana River. Recent data has made it clear that these fumes are causing an immediate and serious threat to the health and safety of residents of South San Diego, and our community needs additional support.

For too long, millions of gallons of sewage, trash, and industrial waste have flowed daily from Tijuana, Mexico into the Tijuana River Valley in San Diego, California and from Tijuana's broken San Antonio de los Buenos Wastewater Treatment Facility into the Pacific Ocean. These flows have made San Diego's beaches the most polluted in the country, closed beaches for more than 1,000 consecutive days, and have severely impacted our residents' health, livelihoods, and ability to access recreational waters.<sup>1</sup> This pollution has even forced the Navy to halt some in-water training sessions to prevent their personnel's exposure to toxins. Despite more than a decade of work to address the issue, our communities continue to face the brunt of the impact of the ongoing sewage flowing from Mexico.

But over the last two years, this crisis has intensified. Last year, researchers published new data about the airborne transmission of toxins from the Tijuana River, making it clear that the sewage posed a threat not just to beachgoers but to people living nearby. In response, we called on President Biden to declare a federal emergency in recognition of the health hazard.<sup>2</sup>

New data collected this month has made it clearer than ever that this is an emergency. Researchers who are studying the environmental impacts on community health have confirmed that communities near the Tijuana River Valley have unhealthy levels of hydrogen sulfide and hydrogen cyanide (HCN)—noxious gases that have been used in chemical warfare. At one site, there was a measurement of ten parts per million of HCN, which is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's limit of exposure for workers with personal protective equipment.<sup>3</sup> Another site had a reading of fifty parts per million of HCN, which is the highest level that researchers' meters could measure.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers have reported that prolonged exposure to these gases are hazardous to human health—especially for vulnerable populations—and can lead to nausea, headaches, nervous system issues, and, in extreme cases, death. In response, South San Diego school districts have limited outdoor activities for their students,<sup>5</sup> and the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District has issued a warning and is recommending that residents who

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1 NBC 7 City News. [“San Diego County Beaches Top List of California's Dirtiest Beaches Due to Tijuana River Sewage.”](#) NBC 7 San Diego, July 17, 2024.

2 Press Release. [“Letter to President Biden Requesting a State of Emergency.”](#) Rep. Juan Vargas. June 2023.

3 CBS8.com. [“San Diego County school districts limit outdoor activity because of wastewater gas.”](#) CBS 8. September 9, 2024.

4 Id.

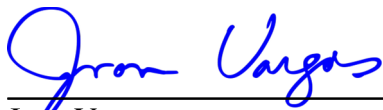
5 Id.

notice strong sewage odors remain indoors if possible or limit physical activity outdoors.<sup>6</sup> To guard against these threats scientists have recommended that residents install air filters or purifiers to remove harmful gases from the air inside their homes.

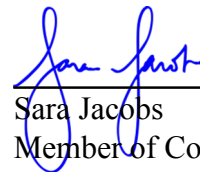
Immediate action must be taken to respond to this imminent and serious threat to our communities from regular exposure to air and water toxins. A federal emergency declaration would help residents of South San Diego get access to the air purifiers and testing equipment that they need to protect themselves against this imminent threat. After President Obama declared a State of Emergency to address the lead water crisis in Flint, Michigan, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was able to provide residents with much-needed water filters and water monitoring technology.<sup>7</sup> The residents of South San Diego need similar support to help them access the air filters and monitoring equipment needed to keep themselves and their families safe.

In light of the recent findings, we want to reiterate our request that a State of Emergency be declared to establish a multi-level government response to address this matter and open avenues for additional federal funding. The ongoing environmental disaster in San Diego's South County warrants the same sense of urgency and immediate attention as any other natural or environmental disaster. Left unaddressed, a pollution crisis of this scale will continue to endanger our communities. As the delegation representing the San Diego region, we once again urge you to take action to address the ongoing crisis by proclaiming a State of Emergency.

Sincerely,



Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress



Sara Jacobs  
Member of Congress



Mike Levin  
Member of Congress



Scott H. Peters  
Member of Congress

Cc: White House Council of Environmental Quality  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<sup>6</sup> Ashcraft, Anna. "[South Bay residents urged to stay indoors as heat worsens sewage smell, creating health risk.](#)" Yahoo News. September 9, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> The White House. "[FACT SHEET: Federal Support for the Flint Water Crisis Response and Recovery.](#)" The Obama White House Archives. May 3, 2016.