Media Release

San Diego Water Board orders federal treatment plant to stop discharge permit violations

Agency also directed to make repairs at wastewater border facility

June 29, 2021

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SAN DIEGO – Moving to protect water quality in the Pacific Ocean and safeguard public health and the environment, the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board has adopted a cease and desist order directing the owners of a California wastewater treatment plant to make repairs and comply with the requirements of its reissued 2018 National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit.

Located in south San Diego County, the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant (SBIWTP), owned and operated by the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC), treats an average of 25 million gallons per day of raw sewage that flows across the border from Tijuana, Mexico. Discharge from the structure is released approximately three miles offshore through the South Bay Ocean Outfall.

“The USIBWC wastewater treatment plant is a critical part of the infrastructure the U.S. and Mexico built to prevent transboundary flows of sewage and ensure they are treated and discharged offshore,” said David Gibson, executive officer of the San Diego Water Board. “This facility must make repairs to meet requirements for protecting public health, water quality and the environment.”

In addition to meeting permit requirements, the board’s action requires the USIBWC to inspect, operate and maintain the plant’s collection and discharge systems, and incorporates a comprehensive monitoring and reporting program to ensure a return to compliance with the Clean Water Act.

Due to improper maintenance of the facility, transboundary flows entering the plant have regularly surpassed capacity and disrupted plant operations, resulting in excess discharges that threaten marine life and pose risks to human health. County officials repeatedly have had to shut down beaches from the international border to Coronado, approximately 16 miles up the coast, due to risks from contamination. Beaches at the southern city limits of Imperial Beach, which is just five miles north of the border, were

closed for 295 days in 2020 and all of 2021 to date. From 2010 to 2019, community access was prohibited an average of 177 days per year.

The plant also treats contaminated runoff at several canyon drainages along the border. Runoff that bypasses the canyon collector systems ultimately flows into the Tijuana River and Tijuana River Estuary, areas of significant ecological importance for rare and endangered species, as well as the Pacific Ocean.

From November 2020 to January 2021, excess discharges from the plant resulted in 46 NPDES permit violations of effluent limits. Additionally, the USIBWC failed to submit required reports — or do so on time — and did not notify the San Diego Water Board of the facility's significant infrastructure problems.

The order requires the USIBWC to submit a compliance report June 20 that identifies all shortcomings, inadequacies and maintenance issues that need to be addressed regarding control measures and includes a schedule for hiring contractors and designing, installing and putting into operation the new or modified control measures and estimated project costs. Also, by Jan. 23, 2022, the plant must be compliant with the permit's effluent limitations for flow, settable solids and turbidity.

More information on these and other topics can be found on the regional board website.

The San Diego Region stretches 85 miles of coastline from Laguna Beach to the U.S.-Mexico border and extends 50 miles inland to the crest of the coastal mountain range. About 90% of its water supply is imported from Northern California and the Colorado River.

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