

The New River Improvement Project *International Border Effort intended to Curb Sewage Exposure and Improve Environmental Conditions*

Overview

[The New River](#) is a severely polluted waterway that flows north across the United States-Mexico border, through the city of Calexico, and continues to the Salton Sea, some 60 miles away. Though discharges from U.S. sources are treated and disinfected to meet state and federal standards, the water entering the country contains raw sewage, industrial, domestic and agricultural wastes, trash and other solid pollutants, owing mostly to Mexicali's overburdened and deteriorating infrastructure. This results in a serious threat to public health and ecosystems for wildlife and other biological resources, while hindering economic development in the Imperial Valley.

To address the situation, the California-Mexico Border Relations Council (CMBRC) formed a committee in 2009 to develop a comprehensive plan. The original Strategic Plan for the [New River Improvement Project](#), which was published in 2011, included a disinfection facility estimated to cost over \$80 million. The project was amended in 2016 and instead features a pipe that encases the dirty water as it bypasses Calexico, preventing any direct or indirect contact, as well as an automated trash screen at the border to remove solid waste. These changes lowered the estimated cost of the project to \$28 million.

The Major Pollutants in the New River

Bacteria from fecal matter - present in the raw sewage flowing from Mexicali – accounts for the highest concentration of waste. Other pollutants include trash, selenium, fertilizers, toxicity and volatile organic constituents.

What the New River Project Will Do

The proposal addresses the public health threat posed by the water quality in Calexico and consists of three structural components:

- Installing a trash screen just north of the border.
- Encasing the water as it bypasses Calexico and rejoins the river as it crosses under the All-American, using wetlands and aeration for remediation.
- Rerouting the wastewater discharged from the city's treatment facility to restore some of the flow in the river channel through the city. Also, designs for a pedestrian and bicycle parkway along the river have been completed, with \$3.2 million in federal money matched by \$800,000 appropriated by the California Natural Resources Agency.

Poor water quality at the border has a long history

The U.S. and Mexico acknowledged the water's poor quality as far back as the 1940's, but took little action until 1980, and only after the situation had worsened due to the population boom and industrial development in Mexicali. The U.S. and Mexico sections of the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) adopted a treaty that established water quality standards at the border and called for the elimination of Mexico's raw sewage discharges by 1982. When these measures proved inadequate because of the crumbling sanitation systems, a series of "quick fix" emergency steps were implemented in various locations in Mexicali and included: An upgrade of the collection system that entailed lining or replacing existing sewer pipes; rehabilitation and improvement of pumping facilities that deliver wastewater to treatment facilities; and installation of backup power equipment. Subsequent projects featured construction of a pumping plant, treatment facility and several collectors, and installation of a pressure force main.

These \$85 million projects – funded in part by the U.S. government and completed in 2007 - led to measurable water quality improvement and a stronger commitment from Mexico to regulate its discharges in Mexicali. The Regional Water Board's most current data show bacteria has been reduced by about 10-fold and volatile organic compounds dropped below detection limits, reducing the overwhelming stench historically associated with the river. The progress notwithstanding, millions of gallons of raw sewage are still being released into the water as aging pumping plants, sewage pipes and other equipment again need to be repaired or replaced. Additionally, the operation and maintenance of the infrastructure remains inconsistent.

The Status of the New River Improvement Project

The design and engineering plans are finalized and submitted for the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) petition process, but funding remains an issue. Only \$10 million of an estimated \$28 million needed for construction has been secured. The city of Calexico, Imperial County and Imperial Irrigation District (IID) each have agreed to pay up to \$50,000 annually for the operation and maintenance of the completed project.

The Interested Parties

Unlike the "fixes" to Mexicali's sanitation system that were completed by 2007 and funded by both countries, the New River Improvement Project currently is a California undertaking. Recent attempts to obtain financial assistance from the federal government have been unsuccessful. Those currently involved in the process include the following:

- The **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA)** collaborates with Mexico to improve the environment and protect the health of people living along the border, and for decades, has provided funding for water infrastructure projects on both sides of the border.
- The California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) lends support to the project by collaborating with all interested parties, including USEPA, County of Imperial, City of Calexico, legislators, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and the residents of Calexico.

- The **Colorado River Regional Water Quality Control Board (Colorado River Board)** monitors water quality at the border, enforces compliance with state and federal standards, and regulates activities in the U.S. that discharge into the New River.
- **Calexico, Imperial County and IDD** committed a combined \$150,000 annually for operation and maintenance of the project. Calexico will also lead the environmental permitting process.
- **California voters** last June approved Proposition 68, which designated \$10 million to the project, but rejected a second bond initiative in November that would have provided additional funding.

Conclusion and Intended Outcomes

The failing sanitation system in Mexicali continues to discharge raw sewage and other waste into the New River, which in turn threatens the health of Calexico residents, harms wildlife and the ecosystem, and undermines Salton Sea management and restoration efforts. The proposed improvements – installing a trash screen, piping the dirty water around the city, pumping a portion of the treated water back into the channel to restore some of the flow – are intended to protect Calexico residents and address threats to ecosystems.

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