



International Boundary and Water Commission
United States and Mexico

Report of Transboundary Bypass Flows into the Tijuana
River

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Water Quality Workgroup

Final Report

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BACKGROUND

Starting on February 6, 2017, and over a period of the next two weeks, the United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission, (USIBWC) received complaints from various entities in the United States (U.S.), including Customs and Border Protection, City of Imperial Beach, California Regional Water Quality Control Board, San Diego Region (San Diego Water Board), San Diego County Air Pollution Control District, and local residents of strong wastewater odors in the Tijuana River Valley and adjoining neighborhoods as well as the beach areas of Imperial Beach, California. The odors were believed to be due to wastewater sourced in the Tijuana River. On February 7, 2017, and again on February 16, 2017, the USIBWC requested information from its counterpart, the Mexican Section (known in Spanish as Comisión Internacional de Limites y Aguas, Sección Mexicana, MXIBWC), on the possible source of these odors. The strong odors were confirmed by U.S. Section personnel several times during the period, the last time being February 17, 2017. MXIBWC informed the USIBWC on February 23, 2017 that the Comisión Estatal de Servicios Públicos de Tijuana (CESPT), had bypassed wastewater flows into the Tijuana River during the repairs of a wastewater line in central Tijuana. The information initially received on February 23, 2017 included the area where the collector was located, the fact that the collector was large and buried at great depth, that the collector had been damaged for some time, and that the repairs had been completed as of February 23, 2017 (pavement repair and other civil work was completed on February 25). USIBWC was further informed by MXIBWC that they were awaiting additional details from CESPT. The USIBWC estimated the volume of the spill based on an assumed flow rate of 300 lps, based on the size of the collector, and an assumed duration of flow from February 6 (the date the odors were first reported) to February 23, 2017 (the date repairs were reported to have been completed in Mexico). Based on this, the USIBWC filed a spill report with California Office of Emergency Services and the San Diego Water Board on February 24, 2017 for an estimated volume of 143 million gallons.

The Tijuana River Watershed is a large binational watershed in southern California/ northern Baja California. The downstream portion of the watershed in Mexico encompasses the densely urbanized city of Tijuana, B.C., and includes two principal tributaries, the Tijuana River (Arroyo de las Palmas- the main tributary in Mexico), and the Rio Alamar (known as Cottonwood Creek in the U.S.) (Figure 1). Water is impounded in both the U.S. and Mexico for use by the communities. The Rio Alamar joins the Tijuana River just south of the U.S. – Mexico international boundary. The flows at this point are made up of primarily return flows from wastewater treatment plant effluent, runoff from urban drainage, and other non-point sources. The location of the broken sewer line is in the area just upstream of the confluence of the Alamar and Tijuana Rivers (Figure 2), approximately 6 miles (10 km) from the international boundary.

