

Speaker 1 ([00:00:01](#)):

So, hello, I just wanna welcome all of you to Fest 2024. Can our government meet the moment? I am Jim Hinch. I'm the South County Reporter for, uh, voice of San Diego. It's great to be with you all, uh, here today. So, in case you're not familiar with us, voice of San Diego is a nonprofit investigative news organization committed to holding public officials accountable and giving you the public the information you need to be advocates for good government. As a nonprofit, we depend on members, donors, and sponsors like you. Thank you for your support. And I'd like to take a minute to recognize the sponsors who helped to make polita possible. A special thanks to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of San Diego for being our partner for us seventh year. Thanks also to the Sequan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, the United Domestic Workers Union, A A RP, the San Diego Foundation Business for Good KY Development, the San Diego Municipal Employees Association, the Asian Business Association Plant, her Hood of the Pacific Southwest Atlantis Group, San Diego Art Matters, and the Southern California Rental Housing Association. We'd also like to recognize KPBS and I News Source are partners in public matters. We're partnering to share content, conversations and events like pol to ensure that all San Diegans understand their opportunity to participate in the democratic process, and that it means more than just showing up to vote every four years.

Speaker 1 ([00:01:56](#)):

So, if you're not able to attend any of our sessions in person, don't worry. We're gonna be posting the recordings to our, to the Pol page of our website, voice of san diego.org, uh, next week. So we welcome your questions, and the way we're gonna do it is during the panel, if a question occurs to you, put your hand up, one of our nice volunteers there in the back. We'll bring you a note card and a pen. Write down your question, hand it back to the volunteer. They'll be collected at the end, and our moderator will go through as many of them as possible. Uh, with our, uh, panelists, uh, you're welcome to tweet along with, uh, the session, share your experience using the hashtag, uh, Fest 2024. You can tag us on Instagram and Facebook. So with that, I'm gonna introduce our moderator, Mackenzie Elmer. She's the environment reporter at, uh, voice of San Diego and Mackenzie Advanced to your slide.

Speaker 2 ([00:02:58](#)):

Yeah. Okay, everyone. Hello. Hello. Um, before I get to our panel of, we have a star studded cast here today, um, and, uh, uh, supervisor Vargas has to leave at two 15, so we're gonna try to, um, get through this as quickly as possible so we can get to some questions possibly. But before I began, um, asking questions, I wanna just kinda lay out how the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis sort of functions. At its core, we have basically what amounts to a plumbing problem. Um, you have the, the Tijuana River, which flows, um, from Mexico into the United States, so a northerly flowing river. And that, uh, generally can collect a lot of pollution contamination from the city and carry it into United States, just south of Imperial Beach. As you see the river mouth there, just ignore all of these boxes and listen to my words.

Speaker 2 ([00:03:53](#)):

Um, and immediately parallel to that, we have what's called the International Collector. It's a, the biggest sewage Main in Tijuana, and it's meant to carry, uh, most of the sewage from like the downtown center core of the city, um, along the border here. And it stops. And there's also this sort of pump here that's really responsible for helping to draw water away from the Tijuana River, um, and, and kind of out towards treatment plants. The whole point being right, we wanna keep any pollution we can out of this river. Um, this pump is sort of, uh, they've, it's sort of brand new, but it does go down often. There's a lot of times electricity problems, et cetera. This international collector is old and aging and has various breaks that cause, um, spills into the river occasionally. And then we have here on the north side of the border in the United States, is this the international wastewater treatment plant.

Speaker 2 ([00:04:50](#)):

It's a plant that both the United States and Mexico put money into to build, to try to handle some of this growing city of Tijuana sewage that, as we know, is aging not functioning correctly. It's not treating water to clean water standards. So we have more a aging infrastructure trying to handle the growing amount of sewage in Tijuana. And there's always, there's also more sewage than this plant that we have built can handle. And when there's excess sewage, it's supposed to make its way to a wastewater treatment plant in Tijuana called Punta Bandera or San Antonio de Los Guanos. But this plant actually is also broken, so any waste that makes its way here is pretty much virtually dumped into the ocean. And so we have sort of two points of pollution that can make its way into the United States. We have this from Punto Bandera.

Speaker 2 ([00:05:48](#)):

When the ocean is flowing northward, which it does in the summertime, uh, the sewage can come from both this broken plant and the river mouth. Um, there's also sewage that can make its way across the border from these two little canyons here. Um, there's supposed to be, um, ways to pump that sewage away doesn't always happen. And there's a lot of communities that have built up here, and these canyons either illegally and they're, or they're just not connected to wastewater at all. And so a lot of like trash and waste can also make its way through these canyons. So it's really, this whole effort is to try to serve the city of Tijuana, which is growing. And it's an important partner for the United States in terms of economics especially, um, and trying to just handle this. And it is a big plumbing issue, but it's gotten very political as we'll find out.

Speaker 2 ([00:06:45](#)):

I just wanna also say, I was reading an article in the Washington Post from 1998 last night. Um, and that was when, uh, I, I failed to mention, sorry, the waste that goes in that US plant gets shot into the ocean. See the South Bay Ocean outfall, it's a big pipe that just shoots it into the ocean after it's been treated. So this, this article had come out right when that was opening, and it was supposed to be like a big, like, oh, we're very excited. We've built this new plant on the US side. We've built this new outfall, but really the issues were still very much the same. We knew already at that point in 1998 that that plant had been underbuilt to handle the amount of sewage coming from Tijuana. And, um, and so we also had a lot of the same players that were Surf Rider Foundation.

Speaker 2 ([00:07:32](#)):

They were all, uh, mayor of Imperial Beach, all still involved in trying to make this better. Um, and so let me just introduce my, my panel here. We have Mary Guerre, she's the mayor of Imperial Beach, the former Imperial Beach City Councilwoman, who's been working on this issue for a long time with Wild Coast. We have supervisor of the, the chair of the Kissen Diego County Board of Supervisors, Nora Vargas. Um, she represents District one from Otai to Chula Vista to Imperial Beach. Originally from Tijuana. We have Congressman Scott Peters. He represents people from Escondido to Coronado, and he's a Democrat running for reelection this November. We have Sally Spiner, she's the US Secretary and Foreign Affairs Officer of the International Boundary and Water Commission, which manages the wastewater treatment plan among a lot of other things across the border. And she also negotiates international treatment, uh, treat agreements, excuse me, between the US and Mexico, and Water Matters.

Speaker 2 ([00:08:31](#)):

So she's been doing this for a long time. She's been here longer than a lot of the leaders of the IBWC has been here. And we have Doug Lighten, an environmental engineer with the U-S-E-P-A, who's worked on joint water projects between the US and Mexico for 20 years. So, did I get anything wrong on that infrastructure explanation? Okay. So I wanna just start off asking kind of a feelings question. Um, what

frustrates you the most about this problem? And if you could all just take like one minute to answer and I'll start with Supervisor Vargas at the end.

Speaker 3 ([00:09:09](#)):

There you go. Hi, everyone. Good afternoon. Um, I am, uh, I'm glad we're here and that we're having this conversation. Uh, but I think what frustrates me the most is that we've been having this conversation for decades. Um, and one minute I would say that I think I've shared with some of the folks who know me. Uh, I was the community representative staffing this issue for Congressman Filner in 1990 something, 93. And since then, we've been fighting for this issue. I was born and raised in Tijuana, so I've actually been in the beaches in Tijuana on the other side as well. So the first thing I did was be, you know, declared a public healthcare crisis in February, 2021 when I became a supervisor. And I can tell you that I think my biggest frustration is the money hasn't been moved, things are not getting done.

Speaker 3 ([00:09:55](#)):

And the problem is that it's become so politicized and instead of looking for solutions, what keeps happening is we keep going around in circles about more money, more money, more money, but the implementation part is not taking place. So I have some thoughts and ideas of how we can move forward faster. Um, I've been doing some work with EPA and the administration and some folks about how, what else we can do, but I think it's the fact that, you know, it is the biggest environmental injustice in our communities, and it's been happening for decades. And, uh, no matter what resolutions we do, no matter how much we're talking about it, things are not moving fast enough. That's my biggest frustration.

Speaker 4 ([00:10:31](#)):

Thank you,

Speaker 2 ([00:10:31](#)):

Mayor Gire.

Speaker 4 ([00:10:34](#)):

Thank you. Thank you very much. So for me, the most frustrating thing is someone who, as you mentioned, since 2006, has been working on this issue on both sides of the border, uh, working with Scripps since they did the first die study, working with E-P-A-I-B-W-C in many different capacities. The most frustrating thing for me is that this is fixable. This is not, you know, rocket science. It's not, you know, technology that, you know, we're launching satellites into the space. It's wastewater treatment, it's basic. If we had enough political will, now we have thankfully champions like Congressman Speed, Scott Peters, Congressman Vargas, who've worked very hard to secure the necessary funding, but unfortunately, the funding isn't enough. So we have reached now a pivotal point that even though that has been, this has been going on for decades, and we have been talking about it, whether it's politicized or not, at the end of the day, we are having very severe and very serious public health impacts on the South Bay communities, including my community of Imperial Beach for the better.

Speaker 4 ([00:11:44](#)):

Part of the last 12 months. We have seen cases ranging from Ella Outbreaks. If you don't know what that is, that is a type of bacteria that you can acquire, uh, for contact in unsanitary conditions that follow tropical storm. Hillary. We've had e coli outbreaks, we've had sinusitis, headaches, asthma, lung lesions, gastrointestinal infections. We are at the point where now we're in a full blown public health crisis. So, I've said this before, I'll say it again. We are past, um, the normal processes that can get us to fixes because we're talking about 5, 10, 15 years away, and we don't have the luxury to wait that long. That's

why we need the state of emergency declaration from both our state and our federal administration, Congressman Peters

Speaker 5 ([00:12:39](#)):

Well, um, I think the frustration is that it's just takes so long to fix. Um, I would say, um, you know, we, Nora was staffing filter before he got the plant built down there, which was great. It was a great thing. Uh, it totally broke. It's not working at all. Um, and we have to not only get it back to 25 million gallons a day, we have to get it to 50 million gallons a day, and then with surge capacity up to 75. Um, and we've been working on that for quite some time and put real money aside for, um, from the, um, U-S-M-C-A \$300 million, in addition to the appropriations we've been working on since 2017 when Beach Day closures went way up again. Um, and it's not quite true that the money hasn't been moving, but it just takes so long to do the permitting and the design.

Speaker 5 ([00:13:22](#)):

So the good news is that we are actually under contract now and breaking ground in a few months on our side of the border. Uh, it's not a complicated thing, as you said, Mackenzie, it's just a sewage issue. It the, you know, the city wastewater department would be technically competent to handle this. It's just complications of dealing with a, with a border. So, um, we have made this a priority. I represent Coronado. Um, it's not just a beach issue. It's not just a tourism issue. It's, this is the beach that people from South Bay use. Um, it's, uh, very important to tourism and it's where the Navy Seals train. So we've been working on it, it takes a long time, but we are on our way to a permanent solution. The other thing I just mentioned, uh, on the, uh, takes too long thing is thank god Mexico has stepped up.

Speaker 5 ([00:14:05](#)):

Mexico is a partner. Um, I think San Diegans understand the border as more of an opportunity than a threat. And Mexico has signed you to deal with us, you do yours and we'll do ours. Um, they're, uh, on track to have the, the plant complete on their side, which is doing nothing now. I mean, raw sewage from Tijuana is headed out without treatment. That's been our main problem, particularly in the summer. As, as, um, the mayor will tell you, um, they are gonna set to turn on their plant in the, in the spring, like, or, or February or March. And that's gonna make a huge difference. So my frustration is it takes too long. Um, but, you know, we've been at it since for, for years now, and, uh, we're gonna get a permanent solution. The frustrating thing, I think, for everyone up here is that the short term is still a crisis.

Speaker 2 ([00:14:50](#)):

Just a explainer, quick, you said U-S-M-C-A, just for the audience. That's the US Mexico Canada Agreement, which is like a big trade agreement between Mexico, US, and Canada. And at, at the kind of final, the final hour, I understand there was like 300 million set aside, uh, for this, for expanding or doing projects

Speaker 5 ([00:15:08](#)):

Just so my, um, my trustee, um, uh, chief over here said, why are you doing a deal with Mexico without dealing with the sewage issue? So we came up with the idea of asking for hundreds of millions of dollars and associated with voting for that Nancy Pelosi asked for 200, president Trump offered zero. We ended up at 300. And that's an excellent start. We, we, we still have a little bit, a little way to go, but that's the really kind of money that can of the quantity that can deal with this problem.

Speaker 2 ([00:15:37](#)):

Yeah. And then, and kind of as I reported later, I think it was maybe last year or something, we discovered that actually the, the international treatment plant we already have needs about that much or if not a lot more in fixes. So that's kind of what you're been doing.

Speaker 5 ([00:15:52](#)):

It's a total of 600 million. Um, because, uh, unfortunately what we, we should get to this too. The, the federal government wasn't keeping up, keeping the maintenance up on our plants. So it's, it was at zero, it wasn't working. Um, and we have to make sure that that doesn't happen again. But, uh, we got 300 from the U-S-M-C-A, we got a hundred million dollars in appropriations, a little bit more than that, uh, this past year. That's enough to get going. We'll need another \$200 million, but we can't use that even for two or probably three years. So we've got time to get that, and we are on track.

Speaker 2 ([00:16:25](#)):

Thank you. Okay. Doug, care to share your, what frustrates you most? And

Speaker 6 ([00:16:30](#)):

I think what, as an engineer, what really frustrates me is that we have the technology available, not just to treat the water, but also turn it back into a resource. It strikes me as odd that in an area that's so dry, uh, Mexico just took a 17% cut from the Colorado River. Uh, we are fighting over having too much water in the Tijuana River. And I, I think we, we need to sort of fundamentally treat this wastewater less like waste and more like water. Um, creating a financial incentive for Mexico to turn the water back into a drinking water supply is, in my opinion, the long term solution to this problem that as, as Mackenzie pointed out, has existed for, you know, probably nearly a century. And I think, uh, as we see the model of San Diego with a pure water project, uh, being able to, to treat water, to potable standards is something that we are really pushing for in, in Mexico, I think just because of need is starting to embrace this idea. So it frustrates me, but on the other hand, I finally am starting to see some progress along that line.

Speaker 2 ([00:17:38](#)):

Yeah, and um, we reported too that the city of Tijuana, a lot of folks experience water shutoffs quite frequently. Um, they, they probably don't have enough, uh, drinking water to go round. It seems that we get a lot of answers as to why there are those water shutoffs. Um, and the other problem that seems to be there is that, uh, we don't always know what's going, what's polluting the water. Um, and, and like Mexico or Tijuana doesn't have a robust, um, inspection program. Like the city of San Diego goes around and, and makes sure all these industries are supposed to be putting in what they say they're putting into the water system. And so in terms of reusing that water, it might be a complicating factor, right? If we don't know what's in it, how do we treat it?

Speaker 6 ([00:18:18](#)):

Yeah, no, certainly Tijuana's industrial pretreatment program needs to be more robust. But that said, uh, the technology has advanced so much with using reverse osmosis. It can remove all of these industrial pollutants. Um, and, and so even pharmaceuticals, those kind of things. In fact, what we find in San Diego and, and, and all these indirect Pablo reuse projects utilizing reverse osmosis, is that what's coming out of the, the reverse osmosis treatment plant, in fact, it's so clean, you have to add minerals back. But it's also cleaner than what's currently coming out of the taps, which is, I hate to, you know, tell people, tell folks this, you're already drinking reused wastewater from Las Vegas, for example, that goes into the Colorado River. And so, and then, and then I think what frustrates me to compound that, or to add to that, that, uh, statement is the fact that Mexico is, I think what could really put a wrench in this is Mexico's looking towards a massive bank of desalination project, which is, would cost, you know, much

more than a, a indirect potable reuse project, but, um, would also, I think in many ways, kill our opportunities for, for wastewater reuse.

Speaker 6 ([00:19:29](#)):

And so I think now is a really good time to, to push for this wastewater reuse and, and take advantage of this crisis. Thank you too. Find a solution. Thank you. Um,

Speaker 2 ([00:19:39](#)):

Sally,

Speaker 7 ([00:19:41](#)):

So first of all, I wanted to say I'm here today representing Commissioner Maria Elena Heier. She's the presidential appointee. She was appointed by President Biden about three years ago. And I know you all know her well. She travels to San Diego regularly, um, at least once a month, sometimes four times a month. So, um, she's personally invested in this issue. And I think the community knows how hard she's working on solutions to these issues. I think there are two things that I find really frustrating. One you alluded to, Congressman Peters, is the funding. I was looking back at some of our historical funding levels. And from 2010 to 2019, in 2010, the International Boundary and Water Commission US section budget was 76 million. And in 2019 it was 77 million. So it varied a little bit, you know, from year to year. But essentially we were straight lined for a decade.

Speaker 7 ([00:20:34](#)):

And so that led to the underinvestment in San Diego as well as in other places. Um, so I think that's one source of frustration. And another source of frustration is what I'm gonna call the whack-a-mole problem. Um, it seems like one step forward, two steps back, you know, we make progress on some of the infrastructure, and then a pump station goes down in Mexico, we make progress on something else, and a pipeline ruptures in Mexico. We make progress on something else. And a hurricane hits San Diego for the first time in 70 or 80 years. So I think that that's, um, one of the sources of frustration is that there isn't kind of linear progress. Um, I think the good news is we do now have significant funding. A lot is going on, on both sides of the border. And I think there's light at the end of the tunnel, but it's, it's, um, not as fast as, as people would like. We understand that. A,

Speaker 2 ([00:21:30](#)):

A quick follow up on that wouldn't respectfully, wouldn't it be the Ibw C'S job to like fight tooth and nail and more publicly ask, like, say that you needed this more money in your budget over the years? I mean, we just found out last year that the plant was broken, and we didn't understand that before.

Speaker 7 ([00:21:46](#)):

So we are an executive branch agency. And so when we request money of the executive branch, that's internal within the executive branch, and therefore the president requests money on our behalf. Um, and so what

Speaker 5 ([00:22:03](#)):

Or doesn't

Speaker 7 ([00:22:04](#)):



Or, or doesn't, right? Depending. Um, but I think one of the things that Commissioner Heier has been very effective at is communicating what the needs are. Um, and so that people like Congressman Peters can say, oh, okay, you need another a hundred million. Let's see what we can do to get another a hundred million.

Speaker 5 ([00:22:21](#)):

Well, because, can I just back up? 'cause Maria Elna <inaudible>, uh, has been such a big addition for this project because, um, we didn't know, we, no one asked us at all to provide money for maintenance for this plant. We would've fought for that if we'd known it was on the precipice of, of, uh, of failure. And we didn't know until she called us and said, you know what, it's broken. Um, and since that, she's been really, she's been really good articulate about funding, not just this, this plant, which is the main project along the border, but all the other infrastructure projects she's got, she's just telling us what we need to know to assess the priority. So, uh, the, the criticism of IBWC before, um, before her, I think is more legitimate than since she came. I think she's been a big improvement.

Speaker 2 ([00:23:07](#)):

Well,

Speaker 3 ([00:23:07](#)):

I was gonna say, and I think it's really important as we think about November and why representation matters, the, I can say this, right, the Trump administration did gutted IBWC, and it de gutted all of those entities. Uh, Sally can't say that because she's an administrator and it's not their job to be political, but I think all of us can talk about that. So when Maria Elna comes in, she had to rebuild everything again. And so that's one, the other part is IBWC is unable to take any philanthropic money. So right now, you know, I just came back from, um, you know, you know, from a clean, clean air right day, and they're not allowed to take any philanthropic money. So they can

Speaker 2 ([00:23:42](#)):

Now though, right? Wasn't there a change just the legislature, the, well, for

Speaker 3 ([00:23:45](#)):

Many years they weren't able to, right? So that, that was like the big deal. How do we make sure that we're able to really think outside the box so that we're able to do this work? And that's, I think, one of the big challenges Senator Padilla led that those efforts also to be able to use some of the money in Mexico. But everything, it's, it's sort of like when the Legisl California legislator said, let's do an assessment, right? And we had the assessment done in 2020. All of the work and everything we are doing is sort of it from the past. We still are not going to be able to meet the needs of our communities, how, and how it's growing both on the Mexican side and the American side, on what we're doing now. So I think it's really important because we need to measure the expectations from our communities because we're saying this is going to be the end <inaudible> the \$300 million, getting the additional dollars, we're gonna fix it. The truth is, is that the organization issues on the Mexican side is something we have to continue to figure out. You know, we don't have jurisdiction over that. And then on the American side, there's still a lot of work that we need to do to make sure that those, uh, things also take, get taken care of.

Speaker 4 ([00:24:47](#)):

Can I just add that the, the treatment plan is now eligible? Well, A BWC is now eligible through a legislative fix that the Congress member championed to receive money not just from philanthropy, but from other sources. So this is a great opportunity for the state to also step up and help us fund, uh, some

of this wastewater infrastructure, because ideally, yes, we need to work collaboratively across the border there. That's where most of the source is coming from. But at the end of the day, if we took control on our infrastructure, on our side, I mean, it's possible. Hudson River has 15 treatment plants along the way to prevent any wastewater going into their waters. The same thing could be done for us.

Speaker 2 ([00:25:27](#)):

So you hear that anybody have like a hundred million or so?

Speaker 7 ([00:25:31](#)):

I, I just wanted to clarify that. That was in our FY 24 appropriations bill, which expires on Monday, and we, it, if that is to continue, it either needs to be in the FY 25 appropriations bill and that it would extend for another year. Or there's also standalone legislation that's been proposed so that it wouldn't have to be renewed every year. But yeah, that, that could be a great help.

Speaker 2 ([00:25:54](#)):

Let's move on to the, um, public health crisis in, well, it's really on both sides of the border, but we obviously, uh, do a lot of reporting in about Imperial Beach South Bay. Um, so more, most recently we've heard, um, you know, researchers were in the field and they, this, they detected some toxic gases and made the county aware of that, um, and in a very public way. And then the, uh, the county kind of came in and, and did some, did its own testing and sort of said, well, you know, it's maybe not as extreme, but we're gonna, it, it definitely spurred some action on the county side, it seems. Um, but I wanted to just ask, um, you know, we, and we've always, always known it's been a water quality problem, right? We've always known that the beaches have been polluted and they closes the beaches, uh, pretty much all year, especially in Imperial Beach. But, um, supervisor Marcus, I just wanted to ask, um, one of your first actions when you, uh, came to power in 2021, you know, was to say or say that there's a public health crisis, um, at the start of your term, but lately, you know, when, when the researchers said they found evidence of dangerous air pollution, you had came out in a press conference and said, and told the public, you know, it's safe. So, so which is it,

Speaker 3 ([00:27:02](#)):

It is a public healthcare crisis. I've never said that it wasn't. So I think it's really important to emphasize it is a public healthcare crisis. I also declared it an emergency, right? Last year because it is, we are in crisis. I think what's really important is that the correct information is provided to the, to our communities. We have one public healthcare, uh, public, uh, director right in the county of San Diego. Dr. Kian is a scientist who sent out our environmental scientists and specialists. They tested, uh, the air, and they were able to provide the information at that moment about not being an imminent threat to our communities. You have to remember that as a county, we have a responsibility to ensure that we're providing scientific based information to our communities. Now, that doesn't mean that we're not working with the researchers. It doesn't mean that we had already, uh, you know, have been working as a result of not only the community, but all of us working together to make sure that the CDC is coming down to San Diego, uh, with 80 plus, uh, folks to do the assessment about the long-term implications, uh, for our communities.

Speaker 3 ([00:28:08](#)):

And so the reason why I did declare it a public healthcare crisis when I was running for office and when I ran, was because of course, there's health implications to being in the beach when it's, when, when it's not, you know, has sewage in it, right? And so we're doing the research, we're working closely, and I think, um, what's really important here is to be able to work with the researchers and for that data to be provided to the county. So we right now, we're waiting for, um, that data to be provided so that we're able to come



up with the right research and, and share the information, but absolutely. And so I think to, to be clear, uh, my statement was can you go to school? Yes. Can you go to work? Yes. Is it safe? It's safe based on the data that we're receiving today, is there eminent threat?

Speaker 3 ([00:28:51](#)):

No. Now I have, I, I live in this community. Is it okay for people to be living with breathing this nasty smell of every day? Absolutely not. And so, you know, I created a, a program to be able to build, bring, you know, the air fresher fresheners, air freshers, uh, air purifier, sorry, into the community. Um, you know, what I told the community when I was giving them those, those, those purifiers was like, this is not a long-term solution. And it's a shame that in our communities, any, that we're actually doing this right now. But I wanted to give something, something so that we can give some hope to folks. And I just heard yesterday from, uh, carb that they're probably gonna be able to send more air purifiers to the community, and so everybody's gonna be able to, we're gonna be able to expand that program. Is it the only way? Is it the right way? Honestly, if this was happening north of eight, this is not what would be happening for our communities. So is this a, a racial issue, environmental issue? Absolutely. And so what I'm trying to figure out is what can we do immediately? Because people need help. And so justice, it's a social justice issue.

Speaker 2 ([00:29:57](#)):

Just to follow up there, um, I think also you were in charge of the Air Pollution Control District released the chair of the board right? In 20 21, 2. Um, and that's a new, uh, sort of agency that's responsible for doing, like, uh, responding to odor complaints, doing air quality monitoring. Um, and so I've noticed that just now it seems the Air Pollution control district is like really responding to this and starting to, you know, put out more sensors, et cetera. So why did that take so long to happen?

Speaker 3 ([00:30:26](#)):

Actually, it, it didn't, um, we actually were the first, the air pollution control district and carbs. So ISO car, the California Air Resources Board, we were the first ones with Gas CASA fac to air to put the air pollution, uh, filters on the San Mexico side and the San Diego side. And what folks need to know is that it's not just the air pollution from the Tijuana River Valley, it's also the air pollution from the number of trucks that are idle in our community. So air pollution has been a top priority for me. It's not something new whether, um, A-A-P-C-D uh, addressing the issue of the sewage is a, a new, uh, initiative that they're working on as a result of the work that we're doing with the CC and and carb. But you have to remember, um, the work that we've been doing at CARB and A PCD has been really focused around contamination as a whole, because it, we do have the transporter pollution, uh, has had an impact on our communities for years. And so has, um, the issue of the economy, right? When, when, uh, trucks are sitting idle for eight hours at our border, that impacts our communities and our schools. And so we've been working on that as well.

Speaker 2 ([00:31:31](#)):

Do you think it's just because we didn't know that air pollution was a thing we needed to pay attention in cor, like in terms of the T one River sewage crisis context, the A PCD

Speaker 3 ([00:31:41](#)):

Or, well, no. I mean, our county, county, our county teams measure air pollution. They measure the water testing, and it had ne haven't not gotten to this level. I think that's what's important, right? So climate change, a lot of the other impacts have gotten to where they're at. And so you, you everybody should know that we have people who specialize in making sure that if there is an emergency and that the, and the, um, the numbers are too high, they send out, uh, our scientists to go check it out, right? But it is the

pollution control district that, uh, is, should be addressing this. We were working with, uh, UCSD came, came to us last year, and Dr. Wooten was the person who was responsible for the county health at the time, and she had been working with them directly to monitor it. Okay.

Speaker 2 ([00:32:24](#)):

Just wanna make sure I got you some tough questions before you had to leave, but it's, oh, did you,

Speaker 5 ([00:32:27](#)):

Just for context, I think one of the things that we did, we were trying to get, um, attention in Washington DC for a problem 3000 miles away. UCSD came to us and said we'd love to do some air testing down there. And we funded it out of our community project fund, uh, funded, uh, er We also worked with, um, the Previs Foundation to help San Diego State assemble the research that had already been done. So I think that might have been a little bit of a catalyst, which is, you know, which is great. Um, but I don't think people had been looking at the air that, that close state before then.

Speaker 4 ([00:33:02](#)):

Yeah, and I'll just add, I'm very, very grateful for the white paper that was commissioned by the Congress member that lists at least 66 peer review journal articles and reports of all the research that has been done over the last two decades regarding, uh, soil, water, and air contamination. So we know that all of those things have been polluted for a long time. For, for me, particularly in my community, we started to see the ailments, the illnesses, about two years ago. We started to have a lot of anecdotal reports. It really got worse with tropical after tropical storm, Hillary, we started to see an increase. Our local doctor started to raise the alarm, gastrointestinal, and this is the gamut. Um, it was because of this paper, the catalyst that we had, basically a group of 50 scientists assembled from four different universities, ut at, at Austin, uc, Riverside, uc, San Diego, and SCSU, uh, embedded in Imperial Beach in the Tijuana River Valley, taking a number of different samples from air to soil to water.

Speaker 4 ([00:34:03](#)):

And I wanted to bring with you all what their preliminary findings were, which they shared with the, um, health officials at the county. Uh, during the, um, the week that we had the press conference, usually scientists, they're very zealous and jealous of data, right? Um, usually they wait until they publish it in a peer review journal before sharing that data. But they had been working with this community for so long and had been doing all of the qualitative data collection, the, the interviews, the talking to people that they, they felt the need to implement what's known as the precautionary principle. When you see something that could potentially have very severe or detrimental effects on health and wellbeing, they raise the alarm. So in this charge, you, you can see this is a hydrogen sulfide reading. Um, these are, um, 2,948 parts per billion. Do you see this dotted line here?

Speaker 4 ([00:34:59](#)):

That's the California Air Resources Board, um, standard, which is 0.03. So we have several different standards. We have the Occupational Safety and Health Administration standard, which allows for wastewater workers who are in full gear and full protective, uh, personal protective equipment can withstand up to 20 parts per million during no more than 10 minutes in one eight hour shift. These measurements have been happening for months, for months, right? We now have empirical evidence that the measurements that we're seeing between 12:00 AM and 6:00 AM are a hundred times above the levels that carb utilizes for ambient standards. Let me be clear, there are no health standards developed yet. Why? Because it would be unethical to put people's in harm's way to make those measurements, or make those determinations, or create those standards. So we've been consistently exposed to these. This is just one measurement of one toxic gas, right?

Speaker 4 ([00:36:01](#)):

We know that there's a number of different volatile organic compounds, noroviruses pathogens, bacteria, parasites that all of these scientists have been collecting for all of these weeks. They're running analysis on all of them. But the scientists did share with us these preliminary findings, which are extremely concerning. But I think most importantly, they validate what all the thousands of people in our communities have been saying, including myself. I can't tell you how many times over the summer my window seals are shut permanently. Like we don't even open our windows anymore, because overnight between two and four in the morning, you would get woken up by the permeating stench in your house, and you couldn't even aerate it until the next day.

Speaker 2 ([00:36:43](#)):

Um, supervisor Vargas, I was just curious. So air pollution, we know about the water pollution issue, um, from your, you know, we have more sensitive tests now that show that how much bacteria is actually in the water, which has been leading to more beach closures. Um, and what I think Mary Gere has also stated is that, you know, we don't know the long-term health impacts of this gas. It hasn't been studied, but we do have a population now being exposed to potentially this, this amount. Um, one thing Imperial Beach has been asking for over and over is like an epidemiological study to be done in the county, um, to, to actually, and that's the way to actually, like, look at for sure how the, the Sew witch crisis impacts a population. That's like the only way to really understand this particular issue. And so would you with the county, or would you now commit to funding such a study so we can understand the impacts?

Speaker 3 ([00:37:34](#)):

So we've already committed to the CDC coming down and doing the epi, um, epidemiology work,

Speaker 2 ([00:37:40](#)):

Um, the surveys of the citizens, right? That's not an epidemiological study. No, I understand.

Speaker 3 ([00:37:43](#)):

But that's the first phase of it, right? We can do the study. That's not a problem. The problem is we wanna make sure, how do we make sure that people get what they need? And where, you know, one of the things that I told the CDC and uh, the EPAI was with them last week in Washington DC is that, you know, we continue to gather information, um, from, you know, 'cause we, we ask are we seeing results at Sharp or at Scripps? And what we're gaining from our hospitals is that they are not. And so what I said to them is, we also need to think about how we're working with the hospitals on the Mexican side. 'cause many of our folks don't go to the doctor. They're not getting the information. And so we're gonna have to do something much more expanded. I don't have, I I do believe that we need to look at how this is gonna impact our communities long term.

Speaker 3 ([00:38:27](#)):

And so we're gonna continue to do this work. My understanding from the CDC from the first step is that they're gonna do the surveys, gather the information from folks. Um, but I think in the end, we can't forget, we have to fix the infrastructure of, uh, this problem because that's what we really need to be focused on. I don't mind. And, and I have right now, um, I'm waiting to hear back. We've heard that we've made it to the final Rouse, and I think I shared it with, uh, Congressman Peters. We've applied for another \$40 million for the area so that Smugglers Gulch can continue to be cleaned. We need to be able to partner with the city of San Diego. So that is, is happening. So it's, there's a couple of other pieces and ways that we can actually be helpful right now, um, as we're doing this work.

Speaker 2 ([00:39:11](#)):

And just quick follow, like Mary Gary, you said, you know, we, you probably in the most outspoken on like how dirty the beaches are, how dirty the air is. Is it safe to live in Imperial Beach?

Speaker 4 ([00:39:22](#)):

I mean, that's what we need to determine. Uh, do you think It doesn't break my heart to talk about this. I know. I'm very well aware that every time I speak about this, it has economic impacts as well. It's hurting our mom and pop small businesses, right? Because now everybody knows us as oh, the dirty town by the sea, right? Um, but at the end of the day, my responsibility is to the people of, in Pearl Beach's Health, safety and Welfare and what they are telling me, what we are seeing empirically is an increase in illnesses, an increase in ailments. We haven't, we haven't fully done a, a very deep study to even understand if there's cancer clusters. Uh, we have a letter that was sent to A PCD by 20 pediatricians raising the alarm as well, because let's be very clear, hydrogen sulfide has very severe, according to the CDC, this is on the CDC D'S website can have severe long-term health effects, especially in children who are developing and need all the oxygen they can in their developing cells.

Speaker 4 ([00:40:21](#)):

They don't have the ability to absorb all of that oxygen because of these oxygen gases. So to your question, TVD, that's what we need more gas sensors. We need to place those sensors in the areas that the scientists have already identified as hotspots. You have a picture behind me, right? That's on Saturn Boulevard that is blocks away from Barry Elementary and, um, the urban area where a lot of people live in the Tijuana River Valley, uh, right around the corner from this area, which as you can see, that's not snow. That's foam. That's at least 12 feet of foam. I took that photo on Monday with Mayor Ron Morrison, who came to see it. The person who lives right around the corner there, Gabriel L he owns a ranch. He's been in the hospital twice because of shortness of breath, not even two weeks ago. So we still have flow in the river. We, our beaches, yes, are reopened, but it's hanging on by a thread because the wind current, the swell and the, and the ocean current direction, the swells are all pushing everything south. So it's just a temporary relief, frankly.

Speaker 2 ([00:41:27](#)):

Yeah. And just another point by about why it's been so bad in the last couple years, there were, there was a huge sewer main break in, in Tijuana that caused a lot of problems. And it caused a lot of sewage to have to be back up, backed up. And, and, and truthfully, the international treatment plan, I think has, it's unable to take that excess sewage. Um, and or it can't or it won't, um, because it's in disrepair. So a lot of that has been making its way into the river and then into Imperial Beach.

Speaker 4 ([00:41:52](#)):

Can can I just add something about that? When you were talking about the international collector being kind of old right there in the map in October, right? And Sally, correct me if I'm wrong, they're gonna replace that and that's, there's gonna be an additional 20 million gallons of raw sewage just flowing into our communities. And

Speaker 7 ([00:42:07](#)):

Yes, we're

Speaker 4 ([00:42:08](#)):

Working on that. There's no, yeah, and it's not me like, oh, Sally, it's your fault.

Speaker 7 (00:42:12):

But I wanna tell you that I don't, and I don't know, I mean, because it's south of the border, so we have to work with our colleagues there. Yeah. But we have repeatedly said, you need to do a bypass. Yes.

Speaker 4 (00:42:22):

That's what we need. And,

Speaker 7 (00:42:23):

Um, we are, if if they say, oh, we don't think that's feasible, we can't do that. We're gonna have our engineers figure out what could be done south of the border. Again, we don't have the answers to that yet, but, um, I spoke with Commissioner Resendez about this issue just a couple of days ago. She's the head of the Mexican section of the International Boundary and Water Commission. She said, even if we can't do a bypass, we'll look at a way where we can divert at least some of that and keep it in Mexico. So hopefully at least they'll minimize the trans boundary flow if they can't stop it. But it, it's a legitimate concern. And, you know, we may not be able to fix the problem entirely, but we're well aware of it and we're working with the Mexican government to try to address it.

Speaker 3 (00:43:04):

So I really appreciate the opportunity, um, to be here. And I really am sorry that I have to leave. I, I have a family issue that I have to go take care of my dog. Um, so, but I wanna just remind folks, right, we are all in this together. The county, uh, for decades didn't do anything around this issue. And I wanna remind folks of that this county is committed to doing the work, this county. Um, our health director, our environmental team, you know, when we were asked to make sure that we do the, did the new testing for the rapid testing for the water, it's the first thing that we implemented. Um, it's not the result that we want, but it's, it is what's making sure that we're keeping people healthy so that people are not in the water, in the beaches when they're, when they are polluted.

Speaker 3 (00:43:47):

We wanna make sure, you know, we came up with this, uh, you know, different colors so that you know exactly what the water is like so that people are taken care of. So we're gonna do the same thing around air. Um, on the Board of Air Pollution Control District, last week, we took a vote to make sure that we are able to share people with people information so that when there is, uh, that level and that threshold that is an eminent threat to our communities, we're ready because let's, let's talk about what this means, right? If it gets to that point, we need to evacuate communities. We need to do those kinds of things. We need to be prepared, and we need to make sure that people know exactly what's happening. We're not at that point right now, but I wanna make sure that we're ready if and when, if, if it ever were to happen, which is what we're trying to fight against right now. So, county's committed to doing this work and continuing to be a partner with everyone

Speaker 2 (00:44:35):

Here. What, what would that take? What would the level of crisis have to be to evacuate a community? Uh,

Speaker 3 (00:44:40):

Uh, there's levels, uh, that the scientists, uh, provide as to what it is. And Dr. Akian, as of now has said, we're, haven't met those church rules yet, but I'm okay. Thank

Speaker 2 (00:44:51):

You. Thank you. Thank you for being with us. Um, just moving on to some of our federal representatives here. Um, I get this question a lot just for people who are curious about the issue, but why can't the US just go and fix what's broken in Mexico, like on its own? Like, why can't that happen? If, if, if they're struggling?

Speaker 5 ([00:45:12](#)):

They're their own country? I mean, they get to, I mean, and, but I would just say this, um, uh, you know, we, we are one region. We call ourselves a mega region. We're two, two cities, one region. We say, uh, the federal relationship with Mexico is really important to solving this problem. Um, I just, I know it's not political, but some people in Washington have talked about Mexico, like they're an enemy. And that is really not helpful to people in San Diego because we have to work together on this problem. Other problems too. So we have really taken, and I also know that, um, that Juan Vargas and the mayor here are actually friendly with people across the border who are in the, uh, administration. And the fact that she's buddies with the governor of Baja is very helpful to us. That relationship is really important. Uh, we can't go in and solve it. Uh, I think, like I said, we have the expertise in the city wastewater department, do what they need. Uh, but it's something that they've gotta do. But they've stepped up as part of an agreement with us that we signed in 2022 to say they're gonna do their part. Every indication is that they're on track. Uh, and, um, I think we have to value that relationship and make sure that we don't, we don't insult our partners. 'cause that is counterproductive for this and other issues.

Speaker 2 ([00:46:26](#)):

And Sally, so you're someone who has to negotiate with, uh, your Mexican counterparts a lot on all of these different international agreements. So how do you convince a country like Mexico, a state like Baja, California that has a lot of other issues and struggles, um, that it has to deal with, that it should prioritize the pollution that's happening, spilling over into another country over all the other things it has to take care of, right?

Speaker 7 ([00:46:50](#)):

So I think persistence is part of it, right? You need to remind Mexico over and over and over again how important this is, what the health impacts are in the United States, how this is detrimental to the relationship between the United States and Commissioner Heier has definitely been doing that. We have been doing that. I moved out here from our headquarters office two years ago to help support that effort. But I also wanted to let you know that the Department of State is also doing that as well. Doug worked out of our embassy for quite a period of time over the last couple of years. Ambassador Ser, US Ambassador to Mexico has raised this issue in Mexico City. He's been to Tijuana multiple times. He's met with the governor, as have we. Um, the cons general, uh, the US cons general in Tijuana, A man named Tom Rio, uh, was tireless on this issue. And the great news for us is he is now in charge of the whole US Mexico border for the Department of State. So you have someone who's knowledgeable, who's a champion, and he can make sure that Washington and Mexico City, um, continue to be involved in this issue.

Speaker 6 ([00:48:00](#)):

Uh, yeah. Thank you Sally. I just add that, um, we do actually have a program, the EPA oversees, we get a allocation from Congress every year to, that allows us to invest in Mexico wastewater infrastructure. The projects in Mexico have to have a US side benefit, and they have to be within a hundred kilometers of the border. But Mexico will always, always, if we can develop a project and it receives 50% funding, US funding, they will always find the money to invest in that project because they're getting a really good bang for their buck versus other areas in Mexico. Um, I mean, Sally said I lived in Mexico. I can tell you



that actually. It's, it's, it's amazing to see, you know, Guadalajara or Mexico City. There, there are areas that have, you know, this problem. Uh, e exactly this problem, lack of wastewater infrastructure.

Speaker 6 ([00:48:55](#)):

And so to see Mexico putting very limited resources to address these, to, to, to be able to fund the projects, um, that Sally laid out, uh, in the, in the treaty minute, um, I think is, is very unique and, and something we see along the US Mexico border. I was just talking to a colleague of mine today about how different it is. Uh, he used to work for the US Trade representative and he said, um, that job was so hard because Mexico doesn't wanna share information. And whereas we have a great working relationship with the Mexican Federal Water Commission. And the reason is, is solely because we're putting money towards the re towards the solution. And that allows for a much more cooperative working relationship than if we're just continuously pointing our fingers and saying, Mexico, please step up.

Speaker 5 ([00:49:47](#)):

Just add one thing is that, um, I don't have any criticism about the Trump EPA. They were very cooperative. Uh, but the Biden administration has really stepped in on all of these fronts and they deserve a lot of credit. We had the Secretary Regan come out twice and I say, I wouldn't say see the plant because it's more than seeing it. He experienced it, if you know what I mean. Um, so did the under Secretary of State. Um, Mr. Verman was out here just recently. Uh, the head of the, um, the, um, the budget office for the president. Uh, she has, she's understands the importance of this, and she's been really helpful. I'll also tell you another seven people who have been really helpful, um, who are Republicans. I have seven Navy seal, uh, colleagues. They're all happen to be Republicans. They would not vote for President Biden's Big Ask, but they're all in on these hundreds of millions dollars to finish this job.

Speaker 5 ([00:50:39](#)):

In fact, one of them came up to me, uh, Ryan Zeke from Montana, who is Secretary of Interior, he is on, he's in congressman again. He says, we gotta get this done. I mean, so there's a tremendous motivation in Washington to finish this job at this point, despite the fact that we're 300, 3000 miles away. It's hard to get their intention if this was happening in Chesapeake Bay, in Maryland, would be on everyone's mind or even in the Great Lakes. So, uh, we've got really good cooperation from everyone. And I would just say the, the relationship we have with Mexico is, is being gardened on both sides in a really constructive way. And it only helps,

Speaker 2 ([00:51:13](#)):

Um, okay, just more on that money topic. 'cause really this could all, this whole problem just needs lots and lots of money thrown at it to, to make those infrastructure fixes, right? So, um, and what's wild to me is, you know, the, the international treatment plant, it's not like your wastewater treatment plant in the city of San Diego where you pay money on your bill every month, and that's what funds the fixes that need to be done. You don't have to think about one breaking down in the United States. Um, usually this plant runs on fixes that the entire Congress has to pass every single time. Um, and that seems to be a huge, huge problem. So is this the best way to run this treatment plant? Do you have any other ideas? And like, okay, so also how do you convince someone from Let I have a dream?

Speaker 5 ([00:51:56](#)):

Um, so actually I think, you know, you, because of the, of the border, we have to, um, we have to rely on the, the federal governments, both them to, to deal with this issue. Um, and it doesn't hurt my feelings that America taxpayers will help San Diego out with this bill, but here's my concern is the maintenance, um, the maintenance is so simple if you tend to it. Um, that the one thing I would love to see, and this, this may not be possible, but I will ask about it, is to see whether the city of San Diego could contract with the

federal government to keep this plan up. That way I know, A, they would know what they're doing and BI know they would be a report to them to do it. And so I don't think we would fall behind, we would not be chasing a contractor around.

Speaker 2 ([00:52:41](#)):

What would that look like? Like the city of San Diego taxpayers paying a little bit more?

Speaker 5 ([00:52:45](#)):

No, no. The, the federal government paid the city as a contract to maintain its plan.

Speaker 7 ([00:52:51](#)):

We currently have a private contractor that we hire that does the o and m on the plan. So you're suggesting to have the same I

Speaker 5 ([00:52:57](#)):

Contract with the extent said, maybe it was Congress not funding it, but nobody's happy with that. I would say the one thing, uh, congressman is, has been really, um, reticent to get involved in our, in our, um, in our efforts because he doesn't want to that have the maintenance fall apart like this. We spent hundreds of millions of dollars on that plant originally, and it wasn't maintained. Maybe it's 'cause IBWC wasn't telling us, but I don't, I don't know, have a lot of faith in this contractor. You tell me we have when this thing is, it's, it's zero. But

Speaker 2 ([00:53:27](#)):

Would you simply to get congress to

Speaker 5 ([00:53:28](#)):

Agree? I'm just saying that I would like to look at that option. I'm not saying I'm not, I would look more at this, but to me, um, that would be a really elegant solution here. It would be, put it in the hands of people I know have the competence to do this and I know will care.

Speaker 2 ([00:53:42](#)):

So you change the contractor, you change the contractor, but you still have to get Congress to put money into the operation and maintenance every single That's true. Do that. So how do you improve that? Like how do you convince like lawmakers from Wisconsin that like they should agree to like constantly put in millions of dollars each year to up keep the plant in operating orders? That's

Speaker 5 ([00:53:59](#)):

Not gonna be, I mean, there's gonna be, there's an understanding that we build something like this's gotta be maintained that I think is not controversial. Um, the issues are can you, how, how far out can you fund it in year one? Because there's all sorts of rules about spending money in the future. Um, but if we sign a contract, we ought to be able to do that. And like, who do you get to contract it? I, and I would just say, Sally, I mean, I, I don't mean to denigrate anybody. Maybe these people are perfectly fine, but they're gonna have to answer. Someone's gonna have to answer for how we got in this position and maybe it's just Congress because we didn't know. But, um, we are, we're not going to go through all this, get to a final solution and then have it fall out. Park is not maintained. Right.

Speaker 7 ([00:54:42](#)):

And I, and I wanted to let you know that Commissioner Heier has identified that as a concern as well, and one of her, what she calls her legacy projects is to have an asset management plan. So we have a concrete plan for capital improvements as well as o and m, and we either stick with a plan or if there's not enough money, we'll know how much money is needed to be able to stick to the plan. So, Mary,

Speaker 4 ([00:55:02](#)):

Quick follow and yeah, just add, this is not a reflection on the current administration at IBWC or might or Commissioner Hener whatsoever. She's doing everything she can with the tools that she has available to her and what she inherited. But I I agree. I mean, again, doesn't matter if it's coming from Mexico or if it's coming from outer space or from a third dimension, it's impacting constituents of the United States and of the great state of Cal of California. So we need to be creative in how we think about this, because we've been lucky that we had these Navy Seals and Ken Calvert and Ryan Zinke on the other side of the aisle, who, by the way, the Republicans have the majority on the house side. They didn't have to approve this funding, but they've been so well aware, we've been doing all these trips. We had the bipartisan delegation earlier in April that they now understand the severity of the project.

Speaker 4 ([00:55:48](#)):

But there's this perfectly good, uh, second treatment plant right next to the international plant. It's a South Bay reclamation plant that treats sewage from the South Bay. It's treating, it's not at capacity right now that potentially could take in some of the river flows, because let's be clear, the international wastewater treatment plant treats 100% sewage from Mexico. The plant that's south of the border that's gonna come online in early spring will diminish the input of pollution to us. But the main source of pollution for us is the river itself. And that's what needs to be diverted and treated. And one way we can expedite that is by using the city of San Diego South Bay Reclamation plant.

Speaker 2 ([00:56:30](#)):

Okay, we do, uh, we have some questions. Go ahead, Jim, from the audience, uh, for our panelists.

Speaker 1 ([00:56:36](#)):

Yeah. So I do have some odd questions, which actually I'm ask you because, but our first question is gonna come from our Aaron Price, uh, fellow Marina Jack Away, who's high school student. Let me just tell you about this, uh, program. Uh, marina, you can go ahead and come up. Um, so each year that Aaron Price Fellows program selects 40 kind, inquisitive, and open-minded ninth graders like Marina here from a pool of 300 applicants for a three year journey. They go behind the scenes to see how cities function, explore the role of community members in shaping society and develop empathy and skills for navigating a diverse world. The program is a high school leadership experience, started in 1991 by the Price Family, the founders of Price Club. Uh, the mission of Aaron Price Fellows program is to prepare a highly motivated and diverse group of San Diego public high school students to be responsible, engaged in carrying members of their community. And today there are more than 1000 Aaron Price Fellows alumni with 500 locally carrying out the mission of the program by making a difference in their families, careers, and communities. So I'll turn this over to Marina to ask the first question, and then subsequent questions will be posed by our moderator from the one submitted by the audience. Take it away.

Speaker 2 ([00:58:06](#)):

Okay. Um, good afternoon. I'm Marina Jake Way. I'm a senior at Point Loma High School. And so based off of what I've researched, I've found very limited information on what is planning on happening to the municipal solid waste, which is excluding the sewage waste once it is, um, taken out of the river. Are there any measures being taken to address this in a timely and a sustainable way? Good question

Speaker 4 ([00:58:30](#)):

For the, the, on the, in the River Valley that's under Cal Recycles responsibility, which is a state agency. Ideally, you would wanna prevent that solid waste from coming across. Solid waste is under the jurisdiction of the city of Tijuana. It's a municipality jurisdiction. And they, and I think a few years ago passed a single use plastic bag ban, and they're in the process of passing one for single use plastics, but most importantly, they don't have enough infrastructure to recycle. So whenever that all of that flows down across the border impacting our area, including waste tires, which is are also under state jurisdiction, um, it has very severe and very detrimental impacts to wildlife. And not to mention the quality of life of people.

Speaker 2 ([00:59:14](#)):

Anybody else? It's, I thought my, my understanding was there are like various agencies that own parts of the land in the Tiwan River Valley. Like the city of San Diego is supposed to clean one little gutter in their canals. Yeah. The, and then the county maybe is responsible for some, but, but mostly it, the funding comes from calorie cycle, especially when it comes to trash assessment studies and interesting. Um, maybe we can team up and do a story together on that. Uh, I'm getting a lot of questions, basically just asking like, people want deadlines for when things are gonna get fixed. Um, I think we have some other things that I explained that were broken. There are some expectation dates for when things will be fixed. So could we run through those? Whoever has the most knowledge on, I mean, whoever would be willing to Yeah, I

Speaker 7 ([00:59:59](#)):

Honestly, I can give you some information. The San Antonio Lados Buenos treatment plant south of the border should be fully operational by the end of this calendar year. Um, the South Bay International wastewater treatment plant, the project to double capacity, we awarded a contract a month ago. We are currently in the design phase, but we're doing something called Progressive Design build where we'll actually be able to do some construction while the design is underway. Um, 20 months for design, up to five years for construction. But with this progressive design build, we hope to shave 18 months off of that timeframe. We recently awarded a contract to rebuild junction box One Junction box one controls the flow of wastewater into the plant. Um, that project will be finished next year. We will be back in compliance with our discharge permit next month. Um, the Hollister pump station has been back online since earlier this month. We have the primary sedimentation tanks that were out for, I don't know, about a year or so. Uh, we now have three fully operational and what,

Speaker 2 ([01:01:06](#)):

What it needed do for people to understand what a primary s

Speaker 7 ([01:01:08](#)):

Yeah. So that's like after the head works in deals with some of the solids and sort of that primary stage of, of treatment and is important for permit compliance. So because

Speaker 2 ([01:01:17](#)):

They're like they were full of

Speaker 7 ([01:01:19](#)):

Gump gum.

Speaker 2 ([01:01:19](#)):

Yes. And you couldn't get the solids out of the waste, so you had to Yeah.

Speaker 7 ([01:01:23](#)):

Okay. Right. So we had to, we had to redo them. They weren't, they weren't operable. So there's actually a lot going on. There's light at the end of the tunnel, um, but there's a lot more that needs to be done.

Speaker 2 ([01:01:36](#)):

Um, thank you. So I guess someone asked, um, do some problems exist, similar problems exist like on the Rio Grande or other rivers near the border? That might be another question for you. Like, are we dealing with

Speaker 5 ([01:01:50](#)):

Yeah, or, um, the, the, um, Texans did the same thing, uh, 20 years ago. They had the same issue and we have a, we have a crossbar issue there as well.

Speaker 2 ([01:02:01](#)):

How's that going? Is

Speaker 5 ([01:02:02](#)):

Well, they're, um, they, the appropriators understand that it's California's turn because they went through it, so that's helpful. Um, but, uh, IBWC does work on infrastructure across the whole border, and now there's a general consensus that, um, we're number one and so that's helpful. But, but Texas had this, this exact problem some, some years ago themselves.

Speaker 2 ([01:02:26](#)):

So,

Speaker 6 ([01:02:27](#)):

No, I was just gonna mention that I used to be, early in my career, the New River was always considered the most polluted river in the United States. And with, um, help for EPA, we, we helped Mexico build a really large, uh, 18 million gallon a day wastewater treatment plant in the southern part of me to take the sewage that was getting into the river and treat it south of the border and then send it to the Rio Hardy, which is a, a tributary to the Colorado River. Um, and that just drastically, I mean, you saw dissolved oxygen levels go from, you know, two to zero to two, uh, to immediately above the, the threshold of five milligrams per liter, meaning that the water had enough oxygen, uh, to, to, so the fish actually returned into the river. Now Mexico, me is coming back and wanting additional monies because of all the growth. And that is the challenge we see all across the border is that none of these projects are permanent solutions. With the amount of growth happening in Mexico, it requires continuous investment, continuous operations and maintenance. Um, Mexico just has a new standard now to, to remove nutrients. And so it's requiring getting, uh, moving away from, from low tech plants into really high tech, uh, treatment plants, which are costlier to maintain. Uh, but, but that's again, what we're seeing and we're looking at reuse as a solution in Mexico in me as well.

Speaker 2 ([01:03:53](#)):

I don't know if I mentioned this, but it, I always try to point out that, um, it's not Mexico entirely to blame for this issue. I mean, Tijuana's population has just exploded. I mean, I can't even get a good, uh, population estimate from the officials there be ever since, um, nafta, ever since there were US companies

building, um, factories in, in Tijuana, um, where they could get a lot cheaper labor. Um, those factories, you know, could possibly be responsible or probably are responsible for some of the pollution entering the river. Um, so we definitely have a, a major role to play in, in the problem. And

Speaker 4 ([01:04:27](#)):

Thank you for mentioning that because that's something we need to be reminded of. This was something that was, we knew what was gonna happen, the negative externalities from the NAFTA trade agreement, we knew we were coming, and it's one of the reasons why the City Council of Imperial Beach passed a resolution, um, and transmitted it to Sandag so that hopefully in the future we can charge a 1% fee on all the trades and of goods and services so that we can put some of that funding towards wastewater infrastructure. It's a, it's a long shot, but it's, it's bringing back the attention to where it should be because it is a shared responsibility.

Speaker 2 ([01:05:00](#)):

Um, met someone asked, many of the panelists have mentioned the problem is that the problem, blah, is that the problem continues to be politicized. Can you clarify who is doing the politicizing <laugh>? Not that we don't have politicians up here, but

Speaker 4 ([01:05:14](#)):

I'm all about science-based information. So if I don't know how that could be political.

Speaker 5 ([01:05:19](#)):

Um, I think that actually we've done a pretty good job of getting bipartisanship in Washington on this. I don't think we would be anywhere if we didn't. So, um, I do think that, uh, you know, it's a, it's an issue that commands a lot of attention here. That's what you mean. And I guess people, uh, raise it as a concern in, in political context. But from our perspective, one of the great successes has been that we've got Republican and democratic support in DC

Speaker 4 ([01:05:47](#)):

And locally too. Locally. We

Speaker 5 ([01:05:49](#)):

Hopeful say, you know, just shout out to me or Bailey, who, um, is my Republican whisperer. He's the one who goes when you take these trips

Speaker 4 ([01:05:56](#)):

And Mayor McCann, mayor, mayor, mayor Morrison, mayor, that's Mayor Morrison in there. Like he came

Speaker 2 ([01:06:01](#)):

National City Yeah.

Speaker 5 ([01:06:01](#)):

Often helping us with the Republican side of the house. And so, um, I, I haven't seen that. I think people are really trying to pull hard, um, uh, to, to solve the problem.

Speaker 2 ([01:06:13](#)):



Um, one of the questions also, what are the changes that are happening in Mexico that will prevent a repeat of previous mistakes that led to lapse in maintenance and infrastructure breakdowns? Can we expect to see like big improvements?

Speaker 4 ([01:06:27](#)):

Anybody? I, I can speak to the political landscape, right? And I'm sure that can speak to the technical aspect, and he alluded to it with the wastewater recycling needs versus desal. Um, but I feel very cautiously optimistic with our new, the new president, Claudia Shaba. She has a PhD in environmental engineering and she was part of the fourth iteration of the IPCC climate change report. So, uh, if we've seen so much difference with President AMLO and the current governor of Baja California, when I first had my first meet and greet right off the bat, she even acknowledged the issue and said it was one of her priorities, which is very different from past government administrations of the state. Um, I think that she will prioritize these issues because I haven't heard anybody mention this, but this affects us equally as Mexico. People haven't been able to access their codes from the borderline all the way to Rosarito for years. And there's tremendous, uh, public health impacts to them as well.

Speaker 6 ([01:07:26](#)):

Yeah, I was also going to mention that the real challenge with wastewater infrastructure is that everything's underground. And so providing maintenance, putting in fixing old pipes, there's no big ribbon cutting that politicians can go to and, and show and put their plaque on some big structure.

Speaker 5 ([01:07:47](#)):

Try me

Speaker 6 ([01:07:49](#)):

<laugh>.

Speaker 2 ([01:07:49](#)):

Yeah, there has been some

Speaker 6 ([01:07:51](#)):

<laugh>. I'm, I'm terrified. I We'll, we'll be the next, uh, sewage. I'll be there. I'll be there. Everyone manhole cover.

Speaker 2 ([01:07:56](#)):

We don't cover those.

Speaker 6 ([01:07:57](#)):

But, um, no, it's, it's, uh, and, and I think Congressman Peters is one of the few that actually do see the value of infrastructure maintenance because, and this is happening across the United States as well. I mean, I looked at the, the amount of money it would, it would take to prevent a break is so much smaller than the amount it takes to fix the break once it's happened. And we've seen places in Tijuana where entire bus stations have been taken out because of a collapse pipe, because when the pipe collapses, all the building structures and the street above it collapse and it's a mess and it's expensive. So I think, um, we have, we need to do a better job at EPA because we do invest in some of these projects and we need to do a better job at highlighting the value of that, because it's really hard to show people the value of preventing a wastewater collection break versus fixing a wastewater collection break.

Speaker 2 ([01:08:53](#)):

Maybe the value could be portrayed by the effects on the population in, in South Bay, that there's a way

Speaker 4 ([01:08:59](#)):

To, and then their communities as well, they're getting sick as well. So I can't help but see parallels with housing and homelessness in this as well. It's so much more expensive to house people than to prevent them from becoming Muslim.

Speaker 2 ([01:09:12](#)):

Um, her last question, I don't know. I just thought I would, someone said if defense funds can build a wall, then defense funds can build a sewage plant. Make it happen. Why not?

Speaker 4 ([01:09:24](#)):

A hundred percent. I

Speaker 2 ([01:09:25](#)):

Figured it out. I'll be that. And they did

Speaker 4 ([01:09:26](#)):

It with an environmental waivers,

Speaker 5 ([01:09:28](#)):

By the way. They didn't build a wall.

Speaker 8 ([01:09:30](#)):

<laugh>.

Speaker 2 ([01:09:32](#)):

Yeah. Okay.

Speaker 5 ([01:09:33](#)):

Get on that schedule. We have a better schedule than that right now, actually.

Speaker 2 ([01:09:36](#)):

Awesome. Um, well I think that's, I think that's good. I thank you all for being here. I appreciate

Speaker 5 ([01:09:43](#)):

It. I would just say thanks. Um, I, I think you've done really, uh, you worked really hard to get this right, Mackenzie, your reporting. It's been really helpful to, because it is such a, um, it could be a very emotional, uh, and scary topic. And also, um, I think you've really done a good job of being very factual and

Speaker 2 ([01:10:02](#)):

Thanks. I've become kind of like a plumber myself and learning all that's good. Yeah. <laugh>.

Speaker 1 ([01:10:13](#)):

So I just wanna, just really quickly before you go, just to let you know that the next session in this room will be a discussion of, uh, proposition five, and we do ask you to check out our website, voice of san diego.org and, uh, sign up for our weekly newsletters there. Thanks very much and thanks to our sponsors.