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Environment

San Diego, Tijuana Said to Face Challenges Related to Growing Border-Area Economy

SAN DIEGO—The cities of Tijuana, Mexico, and San Diego must respond to environmental challenges posed by border-region economic growth, according to a report by the International Community Foundation.

The report, *Blurred Borders: Transboundary Issues and Solutions in the San Diego/Tijuana Border Region*, released March 23 at the University of San Diego, addressed the stress an expanding economy has caused in the regional desert/coastal environment.

The report noted how commercial agreements have expanded the movement of "borderlanders" 45 miles into both nations. It credited maquiladora-led growth with having provided "some" economic benefits, but said growth has worsened pollution in the region.

"The development of factories on the border has brought with it rapid population growth, increased hazardous and solid wastes, unplanned housing developments, and environmental degradation," according to the report. "Residents near potential or actual sites of power plants suffer from, or fear, poor air quality and possible safety hazards."

According to the report, some 40,000 newly arrived migrants live in squatter communities characterized by limited access to potable water and inadequate housing and plumbing.

"Unplanned development in Tijuana," it stated, "poses health and safety risks to the region's residents and also threatens the fragile binational ecosystem."

Sprawl in San Diego, it is pointed out, has led to a loss of rural environment. Rich in biodiversity, the San Diego region is home to 96 listed species under the Endangered Species Act.

Pollution From Mexico. The report highlighted environmental effects on the border town of Imperial Beach and on the flora and fauna in the Tijuana River Estuary subject to trash flows and sediment slides from the squatter settlements.

The California Coastal Conservancy, according to the report, is helping the municipality of Tijuana to devise a plan for stormwater runoff and to address development issues. It said development in the Tijuana-Tecate corridor is disrupting binational wildlife corridors identified over the past five years by local scientists.

The International Community Foundation said it funded the Mexican environmental group Pronatura and the Conservation Biology Institute to identify potential transborder conservation areas under the "Las Californias Binational Conservation Initiative."

Border Fence Opposed. The report twice expressed concern about the environmental effects of a planned border fence being erected by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

"Wildlife corridors span the international border, which will be severely affected if the triple border fence is extended inland and westward to the coast," the report said.

Tijuana and Baja California, it suggested, stand to benefit from knowledge-sharing with San Diego planning agencies such as the San Diego Association of Regional Governments or nongovernmental organizations such as the Regional Workbench Consortium, which have taken the lead in promoting long-term planning, smart growth, sustainability, and crossborder collaboration as ways to resolve sprawl-related issues.

The report said the siting of maquiladora or manufacturing facilities in poorer areas inhabited by migrant workers along the border raises concerns about environmental justice and "contributes to binational environmental health impacts including exposure to air pollution, hazardous waste, and water pollution."

Aiding At-Risk Communities. The report highlighted work being done by San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition, which provides technical and organizing assistance to exposed communities, as a model for crossborder resolution of related problems.

Mentioned also was the planned construction of liquefied natural gas facilities along the Baja California coastline and the potential negative effects to threatened coastal habitats they pose, as well as concerns for safety.

The report called on companies with projected plans in the region such as Shell, Sempra, and Chevron-Texaco to address possible environmental concerns of affected communities.

The governor of Baja California, the report said, has banned the export of sand mined from fragile riparian habitats in the Tecate River watershed for use in the San Diego construction industry, but the mining continues.

The report noted the long-standing problem of untreated sewage from Tijuana leading to beach closures, water pollution, and habitat deterioration has yet to be resolved. Although the U.S. and Mexican governments reached agreement on secondary treatment of the waste in Mexico, the report cited the civic, binational effort on water quality monitoring undertaken by Tijuana-based Ja Jan and San Diego Baykeeper.

Migration Across Border. Migration patterns affecting San Diego and Tijuana are creating "a complex geopolitical tapestry between Southern California and Baja California that is increasingly becoming one."

In addition to the environment, the report addressed education and health and human services and called for "culturally competent" services in each.

It concluded that the San Diego-Tijuana border region is a "living laboratory" for research on problems on "the front line where the impacts of globalization and human migration collide along the geo-political fault line of the industrialized and developing world."