



To: CAHAN San Diego Participants

Date: September 22, 2025

From: Public Health Services

Health Advisory: Update #1: Cross-border Pollution in the Tijuana River Valley and Potential Health Effects

Key Messages

- Cross-border pollution continues to contaminate the Tijuana River Valley and beach water of the south region of San Diego County and leading to release of hydrogen sulfide gas (H₂S) and potentially other chemicals.
- In partnership with the [San Diego County Air Pollution Control District](#) (SDAPCD) and in consultation with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), U.S Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have developed [community guidance](#) for the public to mitigate the effects of H₂S including the use of air purifiers that help filter pollutants, which can be provided free of charge to eligible households through the [AIRE program](#).
- Direct contact with contaminated water from the Tijuana River and surrounding beaches can lead to illness, primarily skin and gastrointestinal illnesses. The COSD [Beach and Bay Program](#) advises the public to stay out of water during [beach closures](#) and follow posted signage around the river.
- Coping with the crisis may lead to stress and the County of San Diego (COSD) encourages those affected to take advantage of [mental health services](#) available in the area.
- Healthcare providers are encouraged to share:
 - Details on how to sign up for a free air purifier through SDAPCD's [AIRE program](#) and [H₂S alerts](#).
 - The COSD [Environmental Dashboard](#) where current relevant environment monitoring data is georeferenced so those affected by the crisis avoid problem areas.
 - The [South Region Illness Concerns webpage](#) where information on sewage safety, survey data, and environmental dashboards are available.
- Healthcare providers are encouraged to ask patients who live or work in the impacted area about impacts to their physical and mental health and treat respectively.
- Healthcare providers can email Tijuana River Valley questions at TJRV.MedicalProviders.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov.

Situation The Tijuana River Valley continues to be severely impacted by contamination from untreated sewage, urban runoff, and industrial waste. This pollution, primarily from raw sewage flowing into the Tijuana River Valley and nearby beaches has impacted many communities, specifically those along the coast and the river valley. Sewage contamination levels have led to beach closures. Hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) gas, which is the direct result of the raw sewage, has at times reached levels that can cause [symptoms in those exposed](#) (e.g., headache, nausea, vomiting) and potentially exacerbating those with chronic respiratory conditions (e.g., asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). The County of San Diego (COSD) has continued to investigate the crisis. Although some infrastructure repairs have been completed, H₂S elevations may still occur and are more likely during warmer months. In partnership with the San Diego County Air

Pollution Control District (SDAPCD) and in consultation with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), have developed recommendations for the public for times when H₂S are elevated.

Background

Cross-border sewage is impacting the Tijuana River Valley and surrounding areas. An in-person Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER) and an online Assessment of Chemical Exposure (ACE) were conducted in late 2024, systematically documenting the impact of the Crisis on the affected communities. The two surveys independently confirmed that most of those responding were very concerned about the Crisis (ACE, 92%) and felt it was getting worse (CASPER, 89%) and had to change their daily routines (ACE, 80%) or felt the Crisis was negatively impacting their quality of life (CASPER, 80%). More than half were experiencing new or worsening symptoms they attributed to the Crises (CASPER, 69%; ACE, 64%) including headache, nausea, cough, irritated throat, dizziness, shortness of breath, fatigue, and migraines. . . About one quarter of which sought medical attention (CASPER, 18%; ACE, 31%). Additionally, the majority also reported mental health symptoms they attributed to the Crisis (CASPER, 65%; ACE, 65%). Survey respondents also reported symptoms consistent with anxiety (CASPER, 14%; ACE 28%) and depression (CASPER, 12%; ACE, 21%) and those symptoms were more frequent among those smelling H₂S more frequently and more intensely. However, only 5% (CASPER) sought out mental health services.

The SDAPCD has installed several [H₂S air monitors in the South Region](#). SDAPCD issues H₂S advisories and updates, and the public can [sign up to receive emails](#). Recommendations during prolonged H₂S elevations are available for the [general public](#) and [schools](#). SDAPCD has also received funding to distribute free air purifiers through the [AIRE program](#). Following online registration, the purifiers can be directly delivered to the person's door.

Actions Requested

1. **Recommend** that patients exposed to H₂S take measures to reduce their exposure, such as:
 - a. Keeping doors and windows closed as much as possible when H₂S is elevated outside.
 - b. When H₂S levels decrease outside, open windows to air out the building.
 - c. Changing the air filters on their central HVAC system to ones that are HEPA or MERV-rated filter with activated carbon (charcoal) and potassium permanganate to improve indoor air quality.
 - d. Using a CARB-certified portable HEPA indoor air filter with activated carbon and potassium permanganate to improve indoor air quality which are available free of charge to eligible households through the AIRE program.
 - e. Temporarily leaving the area, if possible, when H₂S levels are elevated to alleviate persistent, worrisome, or worsening symptoms.
 - f. Burning candles or incense to cover the smell of H₂S is NOT recommended due to the potential fire hazard and the release of volatile organic compounds.
2. **Advise** patients to check the COSD [Environmental Dashboard](#) which includes current SDAPCD H₂S monitoring results, APCD georeferenced air quality complaints, and the COSD Beach and Bay Programs beach advisory and closure information so that:
 - a. patients sensitive to the smell of H₂S can use the above mitigation strategies and avoid areas with a high volume of air quality complaints and,
 - b. avoid direct physical contact with contaminated river and beach water especially those with skin wounds, chronic skin conditions, and those with immune compromise.
3. **Ask** patients who live or work in the impacted area about impacts to their physical and mental health and treat respectively.
4. **Provide** additional information on sewage safety and environmental gases available on the County webpage, [South Region Health Concerns](#).

5. **Email** Tijuana River Valley questions to TJRV.MedicalProviders.HHSA@sdcounty.ca.gov, an inbox for healthcare providers. Responses are provided within one business day. Please note the inbox is not for disease reporting.

Resources

- [CAHAN: Cross-border pollution in the Tijuana River Valley and potential health effects 9-13-2024](#)
- [CDC Sewage Crisis Community Assessment for Public Health emergency Response \(CASPER\) Interactive Results Dashboard](#)
- [ATSDR Sewage Crisis Assessment of Chemical Exposures \(ACE\) Interactive Results Dashboard](#)
- [South Region Illness Concerns webpage](#)
- [SDAPCD Complaint Dashboard \(sandiegocounty.gov\)](#)

Thank you for your participation.

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