

Sewage proposal endorsed in Mexico; U.S. would pay for Tijuana plant

by Sandra Dibble

TIJUANA, Mexico - It would be the biggest sewage treatment plant the city has seen, and it wouldn't cost Mexico a penny.

Won over by the possibility of free sewage treatment and the prospect of a vast supply of recycled water, high-level Mexican officials are openly endorsing a binational plant promoted by a San Marcos, Calif., company.

Though set in Tijuana, the \$170 million facility would be funded by U.S. taxpayers. Mexican officials have said they lack the infrastructure and other resources to handle sewage that flows from Tijuana to San Ysidro and Imperial Beach, Calif., via the Tijuana River.

SEWAGE - Though set in Tijuana, a \$170 million treatment facility would be funded by U.S. taxpayers. Mexico says it lacks the resources to handle sewage that flows from Tijuana to the South Bay via the Tijuana river. Photo by Sandra Dibble.

SEWAGE - CNS

In the 1990s, the U.S. government built the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant in San Ysidro, Calif., to treat such sewage. That facility has never met federal standards for water quality. So to meet a court order, U.S. officials have picked Bajagua to build a second plant 12 miles from San Ysidro - near the confluence of the Alamar and Tijuana rivers.

Mexican agencies are stepping up their support of Bajagua despite sharp debate north of the border over the project. U.S. opponents criticize how politically connected Bajagua officials lined up backers in Congress, and they question whether the plan will decrease pollution on San Diego County beaches.

Bajagua's supporters on both sides of the border say the project offers a unique approach that will result in cleaner beaches in Tijuana as well as San Diego.

"The benefit is for both countries," said Arturo Herrera, commissioner of CILA, the Mexican arm of the binational agency that is overseeing the process.

Even once-skeptical Baja California officials now say they have been won over by the chance to address Tijuana's growing needs for sewage treatment and new water resources.

Baja California Gov. Eugenio Elorduy recently said he backs the project, as did Tijuana Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon, now on leave to run for governor.

Mexican federal water officials are quietly backing the plan, saying they are prepared to make federally controlled lands behind the city's main bus station available for the plant.

Herrera and other government officials familiar with the project are loath to discuss details, saying it is premature until a contractor, design and site have been selected. Three contractors are finalists for the project.

While Bajagua gains support in Mexico, there is no guarantee the facility will be built.

The U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission, which is CILA's sister agency, said last month that upgrading its existing plant at San Ysidro would be a better deal than Bajagua. The U.S. option is expected to cost roughly \$100 million.

In addition, Bajagua appears to be struggling to meet a critical May 2 deadline to issue a construction contract. On March 7, the U.S. boundary commission warned California water regulators that Bajagua may need five more months to meet the deadline. It's unclear how much more time the U.S. commission, state officials and the courts will grant.

The commission is legally obligated to clean 25 million gallons a day of sewage treated at its San Ysidro plant before discharging it into the ocean. That plant has never met the treatment standard required by the U.S. Clean Water Act, and now a court order is requiring compliance by September 2008.

Bajagua officials not only pledge to improve the treatment level to meet U.S. regulations, but also to treat an additional 34 million gallons a day of wastewater in Tijuana.

Then, the company would further treat the water and resell it. The company's proponents in Mexico cite that prospect as a huge plus for Tijuana. The region is almost completely dependent on an aqueduct from the Colorado River.

The water could be used for industry, irrigation and aquifer recharge, said Arturo Espinoza Jaramillo, Baja California's secretary of infrastructure and urban development.

"The idea is that everybody wins," Espinoza said.

Bajagua plans to use private financing to build and operate the plant. In 2004, the Congressional Budget Office estimated the total cost to be about \$600 million over two decades. The U.S. government would repay the company in installments over 20 years, after which the plant would be turned over to Baja California.

Tijuana's sewage contamination problems require a variety of measures, said Jose Luis Castro, a researcher at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Bajagua could be part of the solution, Castro said, but the city still needs to build more drainage systems to capture runoff.

Having "a supply of water treated to a secondary level is very important for Tijuana, ... but the city needs the resources so that users can access that water," Castro said.

U.S. detractors have criticized the International Boundary and Water Commission's no-bid contracting process, the lack of a finalized site and Bajagua's lack of experience in building sewage treatment plants. They say the project doesn't address a major cause of cross-border effluent that pollutes San Diego beaches: the unconnected sewage that runs down across the border from impoverished Tijuana neighborhoods.

Oscar Romo, coastal training program director for the Tijuana Estuary in Imperial Beach, said Bajagua's proposal to sell treated water leaves too many unanswered questions: "Who's going to use it, store it, deliver it, and control quality?" he asked.

"This project will have no impact on reducing beach closures at all," said Serge Dedina, executive director of Wildcoast, an Imperial Beach-based environmental group that staunchly opposes the project.

Romo and Dedina believe the correct approach is to build several small treatment plants in sub-basins of the Tijuana River watershed, using the treated water within each basin. They are promoting a pilot project for 50 houses in Los Laureles Canyon, directly uphill - and upstream - from the Tijuana estuary.

For all the discussion north of the border, debates in Mexico about the Bajagua plant until now have been taking place behind closed doors. Even leaders of the maquiladora sector, expected to be a major client of the plant's recycled water, say they know little about the project.

JoseÃ• Carmelo Zavala, a biochemical engineer who runs a nonprofit group in promoting environmentally friendly manufacturing practices, said Tijuana, like most cash-strapped Mexican cities, badly needs to expand its treatment capacity. If the Bajagua project is built, "we'd more than cover our necessities," he said. "I see it as very positive, but there are shadows that are worth discussing. ... There are things about Bajagua they're not telling us."

Tijuana's estimated population of 1.5 million is expected to double in the next 20 years, and treated water - along with desalination - is increasingly being touted as a way to cover the growing need.

By 2010, Tijuana's demand for water is expected to overtake the current supply, most of it carried in by aqueduct from the Colorado River. An aqueduct expansion would carry Tijuana through 2018.

Bajagua has been quietly lobbying Mexican officials for years, and its consultants include Ernesto Ruffo, a former governor of Baja California.

"They've hired many engineers, some of the most capable men in Tijuana to explain the project," said Miguel Avila, a former state water official now running for mayor.

State officials are hoping savings generated through the Bajagua plant will give them money to invest in projects to collect raw sewage or deliver treated water.

"If they're treating the water, I'd lower my own costs," said JoseÃ• Guadalupe Zamorano, head of the state's public service agency in Tijuana. "And since I'll be spending less, I'll have a greater chance to build more infrastructure."

State and federal water agencies are considering building a 12.5-mile line to carry recycled water from a future treatment plant in eastern Tijuana to the Otay Mesa industrial area. They have begun asking businesses about their interest in such a project.

Saul Garcia Huerta, president of the 250-member Tijuana Maquiladora Association, said 15 to 20 percent of his members are heavy water users, with their own on-site water treatment plants. But they could be persuaded to switch to a public distribution system.

"This could sound attractive and interesting for maquiladoras, but it needs to be competitive," Garcia said.

But JoseÃ• Ibarra, who heads the Association of Otay Mesa Industrialists, is not entirely convinced about the feasibility of selling treated water and investing in new pipelines to deliver it.

"We need to know that this water will be guaranteed," Ibarra said.

Sewage proposal endorsed in Mexico; U.S. would pay for Tijuana plant by Sandra Dibble