Report urges new look at two border sewage ideas

by Terry Rodgers

SAN DIEGO - The U.S. government has been fixated on one partial remedy for the Tijuana River sewage problem and needs to quickly reconsider two alternatives it rejected.

That was a major conclusion of environmental attorney Cory J. Briggs in a newly released report commissioned by the San Diego Foundation.

For decades, sewage and urban runoff from Mexico have flowed into the Tijuana River, polluting beaches across the border in the United States. The International Boundary and Water Commission is working with Bajagua LLC of San Marcos to build a facility in Tijuana that would further treat wastewater first processed at its plant in San Ysidro. But the project has missed the agency's deadlines.

After analyzing the Bajagua proposal for a year, Briggs is urging the commission to re-evaluate two plans for upgrading its facility in San Ysidro. The facility doesn't meet federal standards.

His 39-page report, released Tuesday, scolds the agency's officials for what he describes as a lack of leadership and foresight.

"Instead of leading the region out of the sewage crisis, the commission has allowed the Bajagua project - one of several possible solutions to a small slice of the overall problem - to become all-consuming to the point that it is impossible for any government agency at any level in either country to make any meaningful headway in solving the real problem," Briggs wrote.

For more than a decade, Bajagua has been vying to build a sewage-treatment facility in Tijuana.

Bajagua intends to reclaim the wastewater and purify it enough to sell to manufacturing plants or to supplement Tijuana's supply of drinking water.

The company's officials recently missed deadlines for obtaining a site in Mexico and awarding contracts to build the plant, which has fueled speculation that their project is faltering.

In his report, Briggs faults Bajagua officials for overselling the plan to politicians and the public as a "comprehensive solution" when it would only treat some of the sewage and none of the urban runoff.

Nevertheless, he argues that it would be premature to abandon the Bajagua project because it "remains the treatment proposal closest to completion."

Briggs urges federal officials to act within 90 days to assess whether two other sewage-treatment technologies - activated sludge and aerated ponds - could be built in San Ysidro at a price and timeline comparable to Bajagua.

Sewage pollution from Tijuana is likely to worsen whether or not the Bajagua plant is built. Thousands of new and existing homes in Mexico in the upper reaches of the Tijuana River watershed are not connected to any sewage collection system. Raw sewage from these unplanned communities flows into ditches and canyons that drain into the river.

The San Diego Foundation asked Briggs to evaluate the Bajagua proposal to help settle a feud among leaders of the region's environmental community.

Serge Dedina of Wildcoast and state Assemblywoman Lori Saldana, D-San Diego, have denounced the Bajagua project. The company's legal counsel, Gary Sirota, a former president of the Surfrider Foundation, and Marco Gonzalez, an attorney for San Diego Coastkeeper, favor it.

In an interview, Briggs said he hopes his report will result in a "detente" between the environmentalists and prompt those in authority to spur the federal government into action.

"This project has languished under (the commission's) stewardship," Briggs said.

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