



Senator Laphonza Butler on Disaster Relief

Senator Butler has worked to address both the causes and effects of environmental and natural disasters plaguing California communities, in particular the ongoing sewage pollution issue in the Tijuana River Watershed and worsening wildfires across the state.

Key Legislative Accomplishments

Tijuana River

- ***Background:*** Since 2018, more than 100 billion gallons of toxic wastewater has entered California through the Tijuana River Watershed. These flows bring untreated sewage, trash, and sediment that significantly harm water quality, public health, and the environment in San Diego County. Further, billions of gallons of raw sewage continue to be released directly into the Pacific Ocean south of the U.S.-Mexico border, impacting Southern California communities and closing beaches. The impacts of this ongoing pollution crisis are disproportionately felt by low-income communities of color in San Diego's South Bay, and it has rightly been characterized as **one of the largest ongoing environmental justice issues in our country**.
- ***Visit to the Tijuana River Valley:*** In March, Senator Butler [toured the U.S.-side wastewater treatment plant](#) and convened a roundtable to discuss Tijuana River Valley sewage pollution, bringing together congressional representatives, state and county leaders, mayors from impacted cities, environmental NGOs, and leadership from the federal agencies responsible for the U.S. response to this crisis. During the roundtable, Senator Butler pushed the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) to share a definitive timeline for awarding contracts for design and construction of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant expansion. In subsequent meetings, the Senator's office urgently pressed for federal action to award a contract and begin work, **leading to the [August 21st announcement from IBWC](#) that a design contract has now been awarded, with early construction to begin later this year.**
- ***Monthly Stakeholder Meetings:*** Since March, Senator Butler's office has [led monthly government stakeholder working group meetings](#) to encourage regional collaboration. These meetings have provided a forum for discussion and resulted in the following changes:

Each month, IBWC and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provide updates and take questions from local stakeholders on efforts to clean up and prevent cross-border pollution, including through regular briefings on the current status of the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, as well as the EPA's work with the government of Mexico on projects south of the border.

Due to requests made by local stakeholders in the working group forum, **IBWC has started to regularly report on its engagement** with Mexican officials regarding increasing levels of sediment making it into the U.S., reducing the effectiveness of wastewater canyon collectors and causing mechanical issues at the U.S. treatment facility. Mexican government officials participating in the working group have also committed to taking sediment concerns back to Mexican agencies responsible for mitigating those issues.

Ongoing working group meetings have also helped regional stakeholders align on federal funding strategies and a range of policy initiatives at both the state and federal levels.

- ***Outreach and Discussion with Mexico:*** In May, [Senator Butler wrote](#) to the Mexican Ambassador to the U.S., Esteban Moctezuma Barragán, and U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar, urging prioritization of planned wastewater treatment projects in Mexico to reduce sewage flowing into southern California waterways. Following her letters, the Senator met with Ambassador Moctezuma in Washington, D.C. to reinforce the urgency of the sewage crisis, and to share the stories of impacted Californians she had met with.

In July, the Senator visited Mexico City as part of a Congressional delegation and met with [then-President of Mexico Andrés Manuel López Obrador and then-President-elect Claudia Sheinbaum](#), as well as high-level officials from the Mexican federal agencies responsible for reducing transboundary pollution. During these binational meetings, Senator Butler pressed for answers on the unusually high volume of sewage pollution reaching the United States in recent months and urged the current and incoming administrations to redouble their efforts to stem these flows. She also **received assurances from both President López Obrador and President-elect Sheinbaum that reconstruction of the San Antonio de los Buenos wastewater treatment plant in northern Mexico would be completed this Fall**, thereby eliminating the flows of raw sewage into the Pacific Ocean that make their way north and foul Southern California beaches.

- ***Congressional Delegation Letter to the CDC:*** [Senator Butler led a Congressional delegation letter to the CDC](#) asking the agency to investigate public health risks associated with sewage pollution in the Tijuana River and nearby communities. In July, [CDC Director Dr. Mandy Cohen responded](#) with a [commitment to open up a preliminary investigation](#) into the immediate and long-term potential health impacts of Tijuana River sewage pollution in the region's water, air, and soil. In the same letter, the agency also committed to working with San Diego County and the State of California to provide epidemiological assistance, which includes a more urgent consultation with local health officials on critical public health concerns.

The CDC conducted a Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response in October, surveying 210 households in the South Bay with in-person interviews about their experiences. Additionally, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

launched an online survey for any residents or visitors to the South Bay about their symptoms. The survey is ongoing through November 22nd.

In June, Senator Butler's office participated in a [San Diego Congressional delegation visit to Punta Bandera, Mexico](#) for a binational stakeholder meeting and tour of the San Antonio de los Buenos Wastewater Treatment Plant. The visit and discussion provided an opportunity for U.S. stakeholders to raise concerns with their counterparts in Mexico and highlighted Mexico's progress toward eliminating raw sewage flows into the Pacific Ocean south of the border. This project will help stop the dumping of 35 million gallons of sewage per day directly into the ocean, where it travels up the coast and fouls southern San Diego County beaches.

Disaster Resilience

- *Investing in Community Resilience Act (S. 4900)*: Senator Butler [introduced the Investing in Community Resilience Act](#), which would reduce the financial burden of disasters on local communities, enhance individual and community preparedness, and promote participation in federally-supported resilience programs. This bill would enable communities to **better withstand and recover from events like wildfires, floods, and droughts, which disproportionately affect low-income and rural communities**. The Investing in Community Resilience Act has been bolstered by endorsements from over 80 organizations across the United States, including the BuildStrong America. In September, the bill was favorably reported by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs by a vote of 14-1.