

House Bill May Resolve California Suit Over International Water Treatment

August 3, 2004

Legislation on wastewater treatment funding approved by a House committee could play a key role in resolving a long-standing lawsuit in California filed by environmentalists and San Diego regulators against the International Boundary and Water Commission, an agency created to implement treaties between the United States and Mexico related to water use and resources.

Congressional sources say the legislation could come up on the House floor next month after lawmakers return from their August recess. The bill, H.R. 4794, was approved by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on July 21.

The bill, introduced by Duncan Hunter (R-CA), would provide \$230 million for an expanded sewage treatment facility near the Mexican border. Current funding for the project is \$156 million per year.

Raw sewage that flows from Mexico into the San Diego region along the Tijuana River has prompted concerns by environmentalists and regional officials in the United States. There is currently an advanced treatment facility operated by the international water commission that treats this sewage, but population growth in the surrounding area has challenged the capacity of the facility to adequately treat the sewage.

The environmental group Surfrider and others sued the commission in 2001 for allegedly failing to adequately treat the sewage discharge. The San Diego regional water board also sued the commission the same year, and the two cases were consolidated.

The pending House bill would provide funding for a new secondary treatment facility, a source closely involved with the case says. "This is definitely an indication of Congress's intent to move forward with a solution. I see very little reason for opposition to it and this is most likely the mechanism to resolving the dispute between the federal and state government."

Parties on both sides of the dispute recognize the need to address potential sewage treatment problems, another source says. But difficult negotiations involving numerous federal, state and international agencies have held up progress so far. Sources say the additional funding being considered by Congress could lead to a resolution in the lawsuit and result in construction of a new treatment facility.