

Groups demand action on 2nd border sewage treatment plant;

Leslie Wolf Branscomb.

Years have passed without a long-promised secondary sewage treatment plant at the border, and people are starting to get mad.

Some members of Congress are mad enough to demand progress reports -- now. A local wastewater group is madder -- it wants someone punished.

Meanwhile, the head of the agency drawing all this fire, Carlos Ramirez of the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission, has stepped down from his post, on indefinite medical leave for undisclosed reasons.

It's been nearly three years since Congress passed legislation to address the ongoing border sewage issue, calling for a secondary treatment plant to be built in Tijuana. It was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on Nov. 7, 2000.

There is already a sewage treatment plant just north of the U.S.- Mexico border that treats sewage that otherwise would flow across the border and foul the beaches. However, it treats sewage only to the advanced primary level, and state and federal laws require cleaner secondary treatment.

The law provides for a border treaty to be renegotiated to allow a treatment facility to be built on the Mexican side, since the current treaty says sewage treatment will be done in the United States. Though the legislation does not say who will build the plant, it was drafted with a private project called Bajagua in mind.

Bajagua spokesman Craig Benedetto said this week that the plant could have been built and ready to open by now.

IBWC acting Commissioner Debra Little denied there has been any delay and said negotiations are ongoing.

IBWC Commissioner Ramirez was appointed by President George W. Bush eight months after the legislation was signed. Soon, critics began asking why the sewage treatment project was not progressing.

Ramirez was called before a congressional subcommittee in December 2001 to explain the apparent lack of progress, prompting the IBWC to announce that negotiations with Mexico would commence.

Now four of the five members of the local U.S. House delegation are asking why the negotiations are not done yet.

On July 15, Reps. Duncan Hunter, R-El Cajon; Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-Escondido; Bob Filner, D-San Diego; and Susan Davis, D- San Diego, successfully pushed an amendment to a

foreign relations bill, rebuking the IBWC for failing to conclude negotiations with Mexico.

The amendment states that the IBWC, by failing to complete negotiations, has "endangered the health of the residents of San Diego County," and it requires that monthly progress reports be submitted to Congress.

"The IBWC has ignored efforts of Congress to swiftly resolve this issue and put an end to the pollution of our San Diego beaches," said Cunningham in a statement to the media. "The failure of the IBWC to complete these negotiations with Mexico directly affects the quality of life for many in the San Diego region."

The Metropolitan Wastewater Joint Powers Authority decided last week that Congress did not go far enough. The group includes officials from eight cities, the county and five water districts.

"We can sit here and read all these pontificating statements by congressmen, and they don't do a damn thing about it," said Poway City Councilman Jay Goldby, chairman of the group. "You can submit reports on a daily basis and not really do anything."

"We ought to pass a strongly worded resolution telling them to get off their butts," Goldby said.

"I think someone should be held in contempt," added La Mesa Mayor Art Madrid.

The group voted unanimously to draft a resolution demanding Congress take punitive action against the IBWC. It will be reviewed at its next meeting, Sept. 4, before being sent to Congress.

Madrid also questioned the timing of Ramirez's medical leave, which began July 23, one week after the House of Representatives passed the amendment criticizing the IBWC.

"What caused the commissioner to go out on disability?" Madrid asked. "Was it lack of doing his job, or what?"

Little, a principal engineer who will be acting in Ramirez's stead indefinitely, said there is absolutely no reason to believe the commissioner's medical leave is not legitimate. She asked the public to respect his privacy.

Little returned to IBWC headquarters in El Paso on Friday after a three-week vacation and learned that Ramirez had stepped down and she had been appointed to take his place.

She said she had not yet seen the House amendment and could not comment on it. But, she said, she has full authority to act in Ramirez's stead, including overseeing the ongoing treaty negotiations with Mexico.

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