



**GOOD NEIGHBOR  
ENVIRONMENTAL BOARD**

*Presidential advisory committee on  
environmental and infrastructure issues  
along the U.S. border with Mexico*

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May 19, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Mr. President:

As your federal advisory committee for environmental and infrastructure issues along the U.S. border with Mexico, we write regarding priorities that need to be addressed to preserve and improve the quality of life for the 15 million inhabitants of this complex multicultural region. We are highlighting issues for immediate priority action as well as longer term concerns. While many of these issues have been discussed in Good Neighbor Environmental Board (GNEB or Board) reports, the rapid population growth of the region has outstripped even the excellent binational, U.S. federal, state, and local efforts that have been made to resolve them.

GNEB has identified the following issues for immediate priority action:

- Provision of fresh water for human populations and for ecosystem protection;
- Contamination of ground and surface sources of water; and
- Contamination of air basins, especially along transportation corridors, at ports of entry, in binational border urban areas, and in some rural areas.

GNEB has also identified important border environmental priorities that require concerted action in the near future. These include:

- Inadequate solid and hazardous waste disposal in border communities;
- Barriers for providing security, emergency response, and natural disaster planning and coordination for U.S. border communities due to their border location;
- Insufficient habitat and natural resource protection and conservation;
- Greenhouse gas production and climate variability;
- Health impacts on border communities resulting from environmental quality issues; and
- Inadequate cooperation and collaboration across U.S. agencies at all levels and across the border to address multimedia and binational problems.

Some of these issues are addressed by existing binational programs such as Border 2012, the Border Environmental Infrastructure Fund (BEIF), and the Border Environment Cooperation Commission-North American Development Bank (BECC-NADB) infrastructure efforts, but the needs have outgrown available funding. Others require new, pragmatic initiatives to improve coordination among U.S. agencies and across the international boundary to take advantage of synergies. Stakeholder participation at all levels in developing solutions is critical.

The following paragraphs provide details on both the border environmental priorities and their context as well as proactive responses that GNEB recommends.

### **The Border Context**

The North American Free Trade Agreement brought economic expansion but not prosperity to the border region. It increased trade flows, congestion, and environmental impacts, and also stimulated significant population growth. By 2000, border cities and counties had 12.4 million people and by 2010 and 2020, the border population is projected to reach 17.1 million and 24.1 million, respectively. If the U.S. border counties comprised the 51<sup>st</sup> state, they would rank 1<sup>st</sup> in federal crimes, 13<sup>th</sup> in total population, 2<sup>nd</sup> in incidence of tuberculosis, 3<sup>rd</sup> in hepatitis (a waterborne disease) related deaths, 5<sup>th</sup> in unemployment, 40<sup>th</sup> in per capita income, and 51<sup>st</sup> in the number of health care professionals per capita. Much of the border population is concentrated in binational metropolitan areas such as El Paso-Ciudad Juárez or San Diego-Tijuana, but significant pockets of rural poverty also exist. These include colonias, informal settlements mainly in Texas and New Mexico that lack the most basic infrastructure, and the lands of 26 federally recognized tribes. Addressing environmental problems in the border is complicated not only by the poverty of the region and rapid growth, but also by the transborder nature of many key environmental problems, including air and water quality and hazardous materials management. The U.S. border region is characterized by environmental problems unlike those in any other part of the nation.

### **Border Environmental Programs**

The 1983 La Paz Agreement between the United States and Mexico produced a number of joint efforts to address border environmental issues. Border 2012 is the current effort, and it has successfully mobilized local stakeholders, identified specific goals, and resolved some problems, yet the program has been limited by declining resources. The binational agencies BECC and NADB have made progress improving environmental infrastructure, and the International Boundary and Water Commission has facilitated border infrastructure projects and has also addressed the flood control issue. The Department of Interior has transborder conservation programs with its Mexican counterpart as do other Federal land management agencies. The departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, State, Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development all have specific programs designed to help manage the border environment.

## Immediate Priority Border Environmental Issues

**Ensuring water supply** for human uses and for ecological services is a challenge to the border region. Surface waters are over allocated, and groundwater in some areas is being depleted at an alarming rate. Climate variability will put increasing pressure on border water resources. Contamination of water supplies is a widespread problem, with surface and ground waters affected by anthropogenic pollution. Aquifers are also contaminated by concentrations of naturally occurring materials and intrusion of saline waters from over extraction. In many cases, water resources are shared by the United States and Mexico, making border cooperation critical to providing a sustainable water supply to border communities. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Work to advance the transboundary aquifer assessment effort led by USGS and Mexican agencies; and
- Promote binational water resource research, planning, and management.

**Wastewater treatment** lacks full coverage in the border region, with conditions in many areas reminiscent of much of the United States a half-century ago. The present EPA budget for border water and wastewater funding is \$10 million, while the BECC has received more than \$1.2 billion in project requests for FY 09/10. The region is still characterized by crossborder flows of inadequately treated wastewater, affecting streams, lakes, reservoirs, wetlands, and the near shore marine environment. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Continue BECC-NADB efforts to build needed infrastructure;
- Advance regional and binational watershed research and management efforts, including addressing the continued impacts of non-point source pollution in watersheds; and
- Increase support for binational coordination of coastal waters monitoring efforts in the border region.

**Air quality** problems are ubiquitous in the border region. Regional airsheds such as those of El Paso-Ciudad Juárez-Doña Ana County, NM, and Mexicali-Imperial Valley are out of compliance with U.S. and Mexican federal standards. Vehicle emissions, open burning of agriculture and urban wastes, and unpaved roads all contribute to the problems. The major trade corridors are hotspots for localized air pollution, and ambient air monitoring at ports of entry often shows alarming levels of contaminants, reaching dangerous levels for both those working at the facilities and those waiting to cross the border. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Promote more efficient security measures such as the SENTRI and FAST programs and fully staff entry lanes to reduce wait times at ports of entry;
- Improve electrification efforts at ports of entry facilities to reduce pollution from idling heavy duty vehicles;
- Advance regional airshed management efforts, borrowing lessons from the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez-Doña Ana County Joint Advisory Committee;
- Take action in border communities to control anthropogenic sources of PM10, PM2.5, and ozone; and

- Direct EPA to work with Mexico to expedite its transition to more stringent diesel emissions standards and ultra low sulfur diesel fuel.

### **Additional Border Environmental Priorities That Need More Attention In The Near Future**

***Solid waste*** disposal challenges all border communities as they struggle to find adequate landfill space and develop recycling programs to divert waste to productive end uses. Mexican border communities also receive a large flow of used goods from U.S. communities, including used tires, used and scrap vehicles, used building materials, and used small and large appliances. While this enables U.S. communities to avoid providing for ultimate disposal of these materials, it leads to rapid accumulation of worn out goods in Mexican communities. Some of this trash finds its way back to the United States during floods. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Continue construction of sanitary landfills in border communities that lack them;
- Develop binational reuse and recycling programs and markets;
- Advance binational management of used materials transfers from the U.S. to Mexico; and
- Promote more opportunities to address priority waste streams such as e-waste, used vehicle and cooking oils, and lead acid batteries.

***Hazardous waste*** movement across the border and within the border region is not clearly documented and managed, increasing the vulnerability of border communities to spills and unintended releases. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Implement proper tracking of hazardous materials (HAZMAT) in the border region;
- Promote consistency of import/export HAZMAT management procedures at all border Ports of Entry; and
- Increase the capacity for the development of self-sustaining collection programs for surplus and obsolete pesticides along the border.

***Border security, including illegal cross-border entries and related law enforcement and security*** efforts, has generated a large environmental footprint in the border region in recent decades, especially since September 11, 2001. The challenge is how to control movement across the border and still provide proper environmental protection and emergency response and not unduly disrupt the border economy and the lives of residents. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Promote enhanced coordination between federal, state, and local agencies to reduce environmental impacts of security activities; and
- Promote work with local stakeholders to reduce these impacts.

***Emergency response and natural disaster planning*** capabilities are not well articulated in communities that span the border. Although there are emergency response agreements in place, customs, visa, insurance, and other issues constitute a barrier at the international border by

preventing the ready transit of emergency responders and their equipment. This restricts the ability of border citizens to receive the same emergency response protections that communities entirely within the United States enjoy. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Remove bureaucratic barriers to cross border emergency response;
- Support regular binational emergency response exercises, both tabletop and field exercises; and
- Further elaborate and operationalize the new binational agreement for joint response to natural disasters affecting both countries.

***Habitat and natural resource protection and conservation*** issues are particularly difficult in the border region. Rapid urbanization, the heavy footprint of law enforcement and security activities, and the international boundary have had enormous impacts on habitat through connectivity problems, fragmentation, and destruction. The border, and particularly physical barriers such as the border fence or highways, challenge connection and integrated management of protected areas across the international boundary. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Support coordination and integrated management of binational protected areas; and
- Explore transboundary environmental impact assessment in sensitive areas.

***Greenhouse gas production and climate variability*** is an emerging concern in the border region, and should be addressed with all deliberate speed. Coordination across the border with Mexican authorities is important, not only in terms of data generation and sharing, but also in terms of shared and coordinated measures to reduce emissions. There is a growing need for all potentially impacted communities to anticipate and respond to the challenges posed by a changing environment. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Promote binational development of electricity generation with renewable energy sources in the border states;
- Work to develop binational markets for alternate energy supplies and for trading pollution credits;
- Build capacity in the border region for inventorying greenhouse gasses; and
- Work to support the US-Mexico Bilateral Framework on Clean Energy and Climate Change, announced by presidents Obama and Calderón in April 2009.

***Environmental health*** is an issue central to the priorities listed here. Vulnerable populations, especially children, and environmental quality are folded into all of these environmental priorities. Environmental problems such as air and water pollution and lack of sewage collection and treatment affect the health of border populations. Actions to help address these issues include:

- Strengthen linkages between environmental quality and environmental health efforts.

## Approaches And Solutions

In order for the environmental priorities of the border to be addressed in a timely fashion to support the long term environmental sustainability of the region, the Board recommends that the federal government move forward on a number of fronts in an integrated and coordinated fashion. Key components of this effort are increased coordination and facilitation of border environmental initiatives among U.S. agencies and across the border, with the inclusion of local input very early in the process. Another component is to ensure that the total mix of federal funding devoted to border environmental priorities is adequate. Bullets in the previous section of this letter suggest specific action items.

***Create a Border Environmental Coordinator within the Office of Environmental Quality*** to ensure that border environmental issues are given appropriate priority to provide border communities with the same levels of services as the rest of the nation. Federal border environmental decision making is fragmented, and border communities often feel they are given short shrift. There is an important role for the administration in ensuring that the relevant federal and other agencies adequately address the international and domestic complexities of border environmental issues.

***Improved cooperation across the border*** to address binational problems is needed to support local, state, and federal efforts at transborder problem solving. Institutions such as the Border Liaison Mechanism, the Border 2012 Program, Binational Task Forces, the US/Mexico Joint Working Group, and the Joint Advisory Committee have functioned very well in local border regions and deserve strong support. A serious institutional gap is the lack of a transborder environmental impact assessment process between Mexico and the United States, and this needs to be addressed as a high priority.

***Strengthened community engagement and capacity building*** to develop policy options and solutions for border environmental problems are priorities for involving local border stakeholders in policy outcomes and for fostering and maintaining long-term crossborder cooperation and collaboration. The Border 2012 Program Regional Work Groups, comprised of local community members, have done an admirable job of mobilizing and empowering stakeholders from both sides of the borders. Supporting the Border 2012 Program process should be a priority as should funding implementation of policy initiatives developed by Regional Work Groups.

***Infrastructure funding*** for the border has been dramatically reduced in recent years and there is a backlog of environmental infrastructure projects needed to meet the expanded demand caused by rapid population growth. The current needs of border communities for water and wastewater infrastructure is more than one billion dollars. A key element is the Border Environmental Infrastructure Fund (BEIF), which provides grant funds that enable BECC-NADB to provide affordable loans and grants to border communities for needed infrastructure. We recognize stimulus funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 will be used to ameliorate U.S. border community needs and help projects move forward.

***Sustained applied research and outreach funding*** through Border 2012 and additional grants to universities, nongovernmental organizations, and tribal entities will provide solutions to key issues and increase human capacity in the border region.

The Board will elaborate on the topics and themes raised in this advice letter in its 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, slated for release in early 2010.

Respectfully,



Paul Ganster

cc: The Honorable Joe Biden  
The Vice President of the United States

The Honorable Nancy Sutley  
Chair, Council on Environmental Quality

The Honorable Lisa P. Jackson  
Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency