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ADEQ Issues Order to IBWC for Cadmium Water Quality Violations and Failure to Properly Manage Sewage Sludge

PHOENIX – (Oct. 25, 2010) – A compliance order has been issued to the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission for discharging wastewater containing elevated levels of the toxic metal cadmium into the Santa Cruz River and more than twice the legal limit in biosolids -- the sewage sludge residue from the wastewater treatment process -- spread onto nearby fields north of Nogales and for failure to test and manage biosolids from the Nogales International Wastewater Treatment Plant (NIWTP).

The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality compliance order requires IBWC to work with its Mexican counterpart to meet the limits in IBWC's Clean Water Act permit by reducing cadmium being sent to the Arizona treatment plant. It also requires IBWC to provide information to ADEQ regarding the quality of biosolids generated at the treatment plant.

“The state is telling the responsible federal agency, the IBWC, enough is enough. We need them to step up to the plate and across the border to prevent toxic wastewater and sludge and invest in 21st Century infrastructure,” ADEQ Director Benjamin H. Grumbles said.

Cadmium is a carcinogenic metal commonly found in industrial wastewater, usually in the metal-plating industry. Continued exposure can lead to kidney, lung and bone problems.

The NIWTP treats wastewater from both Nogales, Ariz., and Nogales, Sonora. IBWC's Arizona Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (AZPDES) permit established effluent quality requirements for discharges to the Santa Cruz River under the Clean Water Act. In addition, the AZPDES permit allows biosolids generated at the treatment plant to be applied to agricultural land only under very specific conditions.

Until biosolids quality questions are fully resolved, IBWC is storing the material at the treatment plant. Biosolids stored off-site in anticipation of land application are being held for further testing.

ADEQ has issued seven notices of violation to IBWC since 1995 relating to water quality and biosolids issues. ADEQ and IBWC entered into a consent order in 1996 regarding effluent quality. Although IBWC made improvements to the wastewater treatment plant in 2009, the designs did not include treatment for metals found in industrial wastewater.

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The International Outfall Interceptor (IOI) -- the IBWC wastewater pipeline which connects Nogales, Sonora, to the NIWTP -- was breached earlier this month just south of the border. Repair work on the IOI has resulted in millions of gallons of wastewater being diverted into Nogales Wash in Nogales, Ariz. Although most of the flows were diverted back into the IOI, some flows have reached the Santa Cruz River, about nine miles to the north.

The wastewater has been chlorinated on both sides of the border to reduce the risk of pathogens and crews have been working around the clock to repair the pipeline.

“Today’s clean water order and the recent sewage pipeline break underscore the need for action. Bipartisan, bi-national efforts should focus on preventing pollution and investing in infrastructure,” Grumbles said.

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