

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COALITION

BORDER TOXICS FACT SHEET

Lead batteries exported from the United States for "recycling." Hazardous waste piled in heaps and abandoned. Unexplained childhood illness. Polluted surf pounding the shores of Imperial Beach.

This new circle of poison is being propelled by the many U.S. companies operating in Tijuana. The industrial pollutants that poison the water in colonias and eventually flow back across the border are emblematic of a widespread problem.



Even though the United States and Mexico are separated by a corrugated steel fence, polluted air and water are traded freely along with the manufactured goods. The U.S./Mexico border stretches across 2,000 miles from end to end, but the 10-mile section bordering Tijuana and San Diego is one of the most heavily industrialized, populated, and polluted.

Just thirty-some years ago when Mexico began its maquiladora program to attract foreign manufacturers, Tijuana was a tourist town with a population of around 200,000. Since then, its valleys, mesas, and hills have become crowded with makeshift housing and industrial parks. It is now home to nearly one million people.

While business has boomed, the maquiladoras (foreign-owned companies operating with special tariff concessions in Mexico) are burdening the environment and damaging the public's health with industrial pollutants. Hazardous waste sites dot the border area like cancerous warts. Heavy metals, acids, solvents, and other industrial poisons pour out of company pipes and air stacks and into the surrounding communities.

Encouraged by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the devaluation of the Mexican peso in the mid-to-late-1990s, even more industries are rushing to take advantage of the cheap labor and lax enforcement of environmental regulations in the Mexican border region.

Environmental Health Coalition is dedicated to the prevention and cleanup of toxic pollution.

To counter the shameful legacy of the maquiladoras, we are organizing people from both sides of the border to fight for environmental and economic justice. Look inside for a brief description of the people, places, and pollutants involved in this struggle.

THE RIGHT TO KNOW THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE THE RIGHT TO A TOXIC-FREE COMMUNITY

Yes! Add my voice to EHC's demands that workers and communities in Tijuana be protected from toxic chemicals. My contribution of:

Amount: \$25 \$40 Other \$ _____

Is enclosed Please charge my credit card

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Telephone _____

Credit Card: Master Card Visa

Account No. _____ Exp. Date _____

Signature: _____

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COALITION

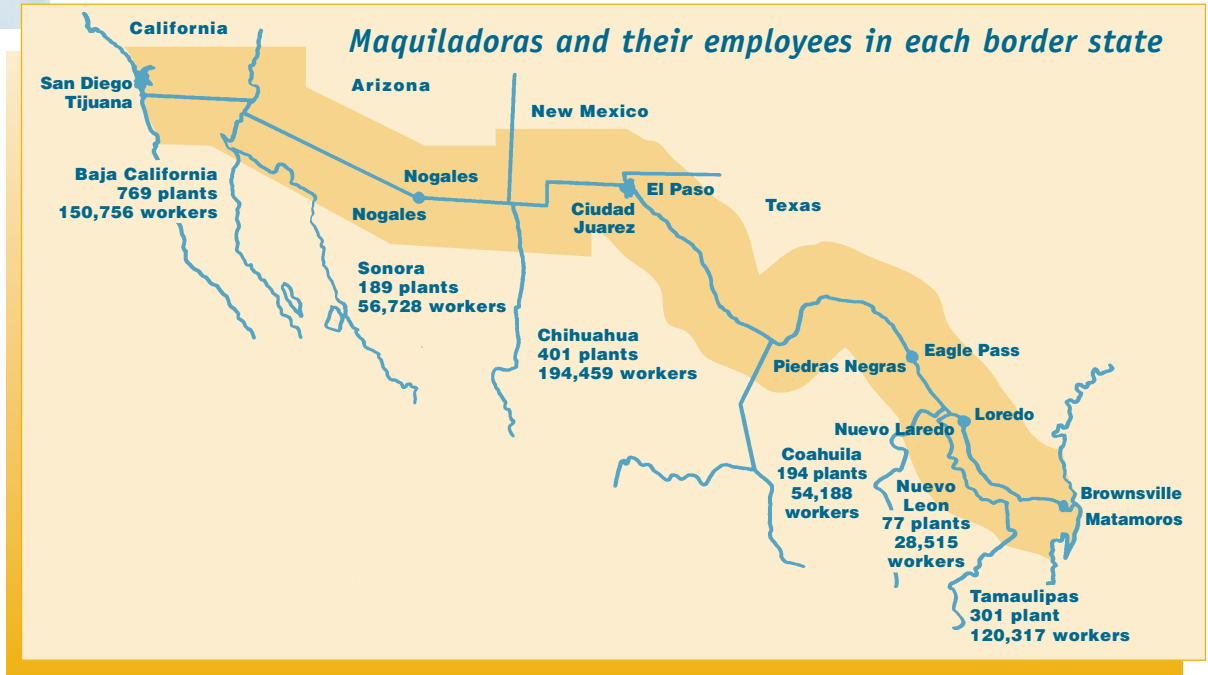
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What is a maquiladora?

Life as we now know it in many Mexican border towns began in 1965 when Mexico started its maquiladora program. This program allowed foreign companies to bring parts or raw materials into Mexico duty-free for assembling and manufacturing, so long as the goods and wastes were returned to their country of origin. But under NAFTA, by the year 2001 all goods will be able to stay in Mexico duty-free – as well as all wastes.

The maquiladora program was designed to bring jobs and prosperity to northern cities, while at the same time providing cheap labor for foreign-owned manufacturers. **Although the program has produced jobs, the work typically involves low wages (the average worker earns about \$4.80 a day), few benefits, little job security, and high exposure to toxics.** In 1997 the maquiladoras employed more than 900,000 people working at more than 3,000 plants, mainly along the border.

Nor is heavy exposure to toxics limited to workers. The maquiladoras produce huge quantities of hazardous waste, little of which finds its way back to the country of origin for proper disposal. In addition, the air and water of local residential communities is fouled by toxic emissions in the air and untreated industrial waste.



Baja California has the largest number of maquiladoras and is the fastest growing region. From 1996 to 1997, more than 250 new maquiladoras opened their doors in Tijuana. Plants range from low-tech woodworking shops

to high-tech electronics firms, from companies employing only a handful of workers to those employing thousands. **The four largest manufacturing sectors are also the four heaviest users of toxic chemicals.**

Toxic Chemical-Intensive Industrial Sectors in Baja California Norte

Number of Maquiladoras (% of total)	Sector	Number of workers (% of total)
151 (23%)	Electronic/Electric	51,550 (47%)
110 (17%)	Plastics/Rubber	16,095 (15%)
82 (12%)	Wood	19,033 (9%)
76 (11%)	Metal	8,807 (8%)
20 (3%)	Toys/Sporting Equipment <i>(a combination of plastics & metal)</i>	4,984 (4%)

These four sectors (including toys/sporting equipment) comprise 66% of all maquiladoras and employ 83% of all maquiladora workers.

The toxic chemicals in use in Tijuana’s maquiladora industry include heavy metals, solvents, and acids. The lack of an adequate infrastructure—sewage treatment system, roads, fire and other emergency services—makes regulation and pollution prevention critical. **The seven highly toxic organic solvents listed in the chart are regularly used in at least three of the four major sectors.** They illustrate the risks to human health and the environment in border communities.

SOLVENTS OF CONCERN USED IN MAQUILADORAS		
CHEMICAL	HEALTH & SAFETY EFFECTS	ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS
1,1,1-Trichloroethane	Affects the central nervous system, liver, and heart; is an irritant and probable human carcinogen	Bioconcentrates in aquatic organisms
Acetone	Acutely toxic; flammable	Forms ground-level ozone
Dichloromethane	Affects the central nervous system; acutely toxic; may cause spontaneous abortions; probable carcinogen	Depletes ozone, pollutes water (can leach through subsoil into groundwater basins)
Methanol	Acutely toxic; may damage liver/blood; highly flammable	Toxic air contaminant
Methyl Ethyl Ketone	Affects the central nervous system, kidneys, and liver; is an irritant and possible carcinogen; flammable	Air pollutant in lower atmosphere
Toluene	Affects the central nervous system, kidneys, liver, and respiratory system; is a possible reproductive toxin	Forms ground-level ozone
Xylene	Affects the central nervous system, liver, and kidneys; impairs muscle coordination; is an irritant	Forms ground-level ozone, pollutes water, persists in soil and can leach into groundwater

Each chemical alone is highly toxic. They have been observed and studied throughout the industrialized world for the past 30 years and some of their ill effects are well known. Science is just beginning to understand that in combination their effects can be vastly multiplied.

Tijuana communities fighting back: EHC and community residents are organizing to demand better representation and pollution prevention.

Ojo de Agua, Colonia El Florido Viejo: Tijuana’s largest illegal toxic waste dump

From 1987 to 1991, Alco Pacifico accumulated more than 30,000 tons of hazardous waste at the company’s battery-recycling operation. **Lead, arsenic, antimony, and a host of other heavy metals contaminated the site, leaving a 15-foot-high mound of slag** when its U.S. owners abruptly went out of business and filed for bankruptcy.

“Workers are now removing the toxic soil, but with little or no protection for the workers or residents,” remarks community activist Julia Villaseñor. “The community doesn’t know how much its children’s health has been damaged, or if their own property has been contaminated. Since the government still refuses to deal with these issues, we are starting our own self-help education program, but will continue to push for long-term solutions.”

Occupational Health and Safety for Maquiladora Workers

The typical maquiladora worker is a woman in her prime reproductive years – between the ages of 16 and 28. Her constant exposure to toxic pollutants risks her own health and that of her children—born and unborn.

“We have seen cases of women who have suffered spontaneous abortions while working in maquiladoras,” says Reyna Montero, President of Casa de la Mujer/Grupo Factor X. “One woman having a miscarriage was not allowed to leave work until the end of her shift. **Over and over we see women’s health being put at risk – the women are blamed and punished for these spontaneous abortions and the companies, which expose the women to toxic chemicals, go free.** These same women also endure discriminatory hiring practices, sexual harassment, and illegal firings. That is why Factor X works to educate the women in maquiladoras to protect their rights as workers and as women.”

WORKING FOR TOXIC-FREE COMMUNITIES IN SAN DIEGO-TIJUANA

Environmental Health Coalition

Border Environmental Justice Campaign



Colonia Chilpancingo: A community under toxic siege

Colonia Chilpancingo sits beneath the Mesa de Otay Industrial Park, home to more than 200 maquiladoras. Chemical wastes containing acids, solvents and heavy metals drain from the giant industrial complex into the residential community below. Huge yellow splotches dot the canyons where acids and other toxics have been dumped.

Maurilio Sanchez, president of a local community group comments: "When maquiladoras and other industries first began to arrive, we were glad. We said to ourselves 'there will be plenty of work close to our homes.' But to our surprise, streams of contaminated water surfaced from everywhere; our children began to get sick. No one could tell us why our children were getting sick. **Now, we are talking to every resident about their health problems and inviting them to join our fight to keep industrial pollution out of our colonia.**"

Sewage Treatment: Toxic Toilet

If everybody wants to clean up the environment, what's the problem with the \$460 million International Waste-water Treatment Plant built to cleanse Tijuana's sewage?

According to Marta Rocha of Amas de Casa de Playas de Tijuana, "It is absurd to have spent so much money and not have a plant that meets the needs of the region. The plant doesn't have the capacity to treat current sewage levels and overflows of raw sewage will continue to contaminate beaches. Furthermore, there is no adequate plan to reclaim the much needed treated waste-water. Another problem is the contamination of sewage water by industrial discharges. **Development of adequate industrial pretreatment programs must take precedence over more industrial development.**"

Environmental Health

Coalition

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE WANT

Environmental Health Coalition has been fighting for a better environment in the San Diego region since 1980. EHC believes that clean air, clean land, clean water, and safe work places are inalienable rights. Border communities and workers are being deprived of these rights by their governments and transnational corporations.

To achieve environmental justice along the border, EHC's Border Environmental Justice Campaign is working to achieve:

The Right to Know - Everyone has the right to know what toxics are being used in their neighborhood and workplace. This information is crucial to seeking the reduction of industrial pollution. We demand the passage and enforcement of laws requiring businesses to report regularly what chemicals are being used and released into the environment and workplace.

The Amendment of NAFTA - The North American Free Trade Agreement has been a boon for business but a bane for workers and the environment because nearly all of its provisions for protecting workers and the environment are unenforceable and weak. NAFTA must be amended so that health and safety assurances are an integral part of the pact.

The Right to Participate - Every community has the right to participate in planning, implementing and evaluating projects that affect their quality of life, public health and overall environment. We demand that governments and corporations establish a process which requires public participation in decisions affecting everyone.

Toxic Cleanup - The economic boom along the border has left a hazardous mess in need of restoration. Progress cannot be claimed when heavy metals, acids, solvents and many other toxics soil the ground, poison the water and contaminate the air in many communities. We demand these sites be cleaned up in health protective ways that restore environmental quality.

Environmental Health Coalition's other campaigns to achieve toxic-free communities throughout the San Diego-Tijuana region include:

Clean Bay Campaign - fighting pollution in San Diego Bay from military, industrial, and residential sources.

Community Assistance Program - providing assistance to individuals and groups throughout the region who are trying to reduce the use of toxics in their homes or face toxic pollution in their neighborhoods.

Toxic Free Neighborhoods Campaign - organizing to reduce military and industrial pollution in San Diego's low-income communities of color.

For more information, contact EHC at the address on the front.