

The Nogales Treatment Plant Expansion On Track----Now For the Nogales Wash 1/3/06 --- Sherry Sass

At long last, the binational Nogales International Wastewater Treatment Plant will be upgraded and expanded. Government employees who worked hard to get us this far—as well as citizens and local groups who kept up the pressure—are to be commended for their diligent efforts. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been an especially critical partner as well as protector of the funding, which was held up for several years when the planning process bogged down. So there's much thanks to be given all around.

The effluent created by the Plant will be much improved in quality when the upgrade/expansion is completed, within the next few years. Cleaner effluent will not only help our riparian ecosystem, but will also help safeguard our drinking water supplies.

But this upgrade won't solve all our water quality problems. The greatest threat to this region's water supply still looms. It intermittently spews raw sewage, industrial wastes, trash and who knows what else right through the heart of the Santa Cruz Valley. This culprit is the Nogales Wash and its tributaries, which drain the "twin" border cities of Nogales.

The Wash flow is usually quite clean, as Friends of the Santa Cruz River (FOSCR) has found from our monthly RiverWatch sampling over the past 13 years. However, "usually" is not good enough. Toxic pulses from spills, leaks, or purposefully dumped pollutants can, and have, run down the Wash and caused havoc. (Remember when part of Nogales, AZ was evacuated because of a diesel fuel spill in the Wash?) We may not find out about some vile contaminant slug until months or years later, when it shows up in our drinking water.

So how can Nogales Wash pollution be stopped? Nogales, Sonora is a highly industrialized city that is over ten times the size of Nogales, Arizona; the Wash's pollution mostly comes from across the line. So here's where we need our federal government, again.

Santa Cruz County, like many other border areas in the U.S., struggles with several outsized problems we don't have the resources or the authority to solve. Our federal government has only partly met its responsibility to protect the health and well-being of all of us. It has provided the money needed to upgrade the treatment plant, which actually gets 2/3 or more of its sewage from Mexico. Its next step should and must be cleaning up the Nogales Wash.

For our part, we in the county can't let our government slide, just because the treatment plant is finally being fixed. We need to let our federal representatives and the President know that we still have a major public health hazard entering our country. On the national level, we need to put more pressure on Mexico to

clean up its pollution sources, perhaps providing technical or other needed assistance to generate effective action.

We need more frequent and intensive Wash monitoring, so we have a chance of blocking a major spill before it gets into our groundwater. We also need additional funding to repair or replace all the leaky pipes that carry sewage.

We live on an international border. We deserve to have our public health protected from international causes, including the treatment plant, sewage pipes, AND the Nogales Wash.