

EPA official touts border environmental drive

By [Mike Lee](#) 1:55 p.m. Sept. 21, 2011

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Jared Blumenfeld, regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency based in San Francisco, toured the international border on Wednesday to promote environmental solutions. — *Howard Lipin*

The Southwest's top environmental regulator toured the southern edge of San Diego County on Wednesday to promote an eight-year plan for improving water supplies, air quality and energy efficiency along the 2,000-mile boundary between the United States and Mexico.

Jared Blumenfeld, regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency based in San Francisco, didn't hit the spots that most visitors go. Instead, he stopped at the corrugated metal border fence, a wastewater treatment plant and a garbage pile in the Tijuana River Valley to build support for a binational blueprint.

Border 2020

The binational program includes six main goals:

- 1) Reduce air pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions
- 2) Boost access to safe and clean water

- 3) Improve waste management and clean sites
- 4) Increase chemical safety efforts
- 5) Enhance preparedness for emergency response
- 6) Police compliance with environmental laws

Called Border 2020, it is the latest in a string of cooperative strategies that goes back to a 1983 agreement between the two countries. The expansive document focuses on climate change, children's health and environmental education among other priorities. Blumenfeld is working with Mexico, ten border states and 26 border tribes to finalize plans.

He was at once upbeat about the potential for solutions and sober about the difficulty of convincing Congress to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on related projects when funding for the U.S.-Mexico Border Water Infrastructure Program has shrunk by 90 percent since the mid-1990s. Border cleanup advocates said Blumenfeld's interest is enough to boost hope that seemingly intractable problems will continue to shrink even if they won't disappear.

The current Border 2012 program expires next year. It's credited with helping to reduce flooding, improve estuaries, boost drinking water supplies, remove junk tires and prompt other upgrades in the region where 14 million people live.

"Incremental progress can sometimes feel frustratingly slow," Blumenfeld said, before ducking into the towering brush that hides streams of trash along the Tijuana River. "The needs remain great."

In few places are the challenges as clear as they are in San Ysidro, which sits downhill from Tijuana and has suffered from sewage and garbage flowing across the border for decades.

"(Similar problems) have been solved in other places," said Blumenfeld. "It's not a question of this being the first place to solve them. ... Just the fact that now 90 percent of Tijuana residents have access to wastewater treatment systems is a testament to the fact that it can be done."

He said the biggest issue is financing as his agency and others try to trim costs.

"The amount of money that was being given to this in the last 15 years will be hard to replicate in the next 15 years," Blumenfeld said. "The real question is how we focus on things that have to be done and at the same time work out funding sources and streams that are sustainable."

Border 2020 is supposed to be the central forum for how work priorities are set.

[\[Draft document and directions for how to file comments about it.\]](#)

Serge Dedina, a veteran border cleanup advocate with Wildcoast in Imperial Beach, said Border 2012 set a solid foundation. EPA's website shows it gave Wildcoast \$53,000 last year to reduce trash in Tijuana's Los Laureles Canyon.

"EPA has been really strong understanding the needs on the ground," Dedina said. "It's much more effective to train Tijuana residents to deal with trash instead of paying people in the United States to clean up."

[\[Details about events during Wildcoast-sponsored Tijuana River Action Month\]](#)

Paul Ganster, director of the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias at San Diego State University, said Border 2012 was significant because it included Native Americans and state governments. He said it also provided a consistent way to prioritize projects rather than having them done piecemeal.

"One of its great achievements was what I call improving community and building capacity in border communities," Ganster said. "They did a pretty good job given the incredible funding constraints that the border has been under for a very long time."

As for the next border work plan, Ganster agrees with Blumenfeld that water and wastewater facilities remain the top priority.

"You sit here and you kind of wonder when are things going to get solved?" Ganster said. "You will probably never achieve a final solution but you can achieve incremental improvements. I think that's what's happening."

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