

# ONE OF CONTINENT'S MOST POLLUTED RIVERS IS ROUTE INTO U.S. FOR ILLEGAL;

## IMMIGRANTS;

### MEXICAN NATIONALS FLOAT PAST BORDER PATROL AGENTS WHO WON'T ENTER WATER

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

January 30, 2000, Sunday, THREE STAR EDITION

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**Section:** NEWS, Pg. A12

**Length:** 712 words

**Byline:** The Associated Press

**Dateline:** CALEXICO, CALIF.

## **Body**

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Two **Border Patrol agents** stand on the banks of **one** of the **most polluted rivers** in North America and shout at six **illegal immigrants** in their underwear who have **floated** into the **United States** on an inner tube.

"Get out of the **river**! It's very dangerous!" George Wetjen calls out in Spanish to the men just 10 feet away.

But the **immigrants** ignore the **agents**. They **float past** and vanish into the night, holding the inner tube with **one** hand and gripping black plastic bags containing their dry clothes with the other.

The **immigrants** have beaten the **Border Patrol**. That's because **agents** draw the line at getting in the New **River** - an oily, foul-smelling stew of raw sewage, industrial waste, agricultural runoff and trash.

The **river** flows north from the **border** city of Mexicali, Mexico, and empties into the Salton Sea in the California desert.

Desperate to reach the **United States** and blocked by tighter security elsewhere along the Southwestern **border**, **illegal immigrants** use the **river** as a nearly guaranteed path into the region east of San Diego, **one** of the nation's busiest corridors for **illegal** immigration.

Some **immigrants** may not know the New **River** is badly **polluted**. Others don't care.

The **river** is posted with signs warning of drowning, rattlesnakes and the treacherous terrain, but not **pollution**. Still, a glance and a sniff are all it takes to know. Stiff clumps of foam glide along on the surface. Plastic jugs, empty cans and blocks of wood bob in the **water** and line the banks. The stench of sewage is overpowering.

What's not seen are the carcinogens, bacteria and viruses.

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The Environmental Protection Agency lists the river as one of the most polluted in North America. It contains 15 million gallons of untreated or partially treated sewage from the overwhelmed sewer system in Mexicali, a city of more than 600,000.

Eugenia McNaughton, who monitors the river for the EPA, said Mexico and the United States are working to reduce the pollution, spending \$ 50 million to expand Mexicali's sewer capacity.

Anyone who swims in the river risks exposure to such things as salmonella, typhoid, E. coli bacteria and parasites, said Yvonne Smith, public health director for Imperial County.

"It's like having a rattlesnake in your back yard," she said. "You have no idea when it's going to hit and make someone sick."

Sometimes agents find dark-colored vomit from immigrants who swallowed river water and got sick after reaching the river banks.

But if immigrants are falling ill from the water, they aren't reporting it, said Vivian Perez, administrator of an Imperial Valley clinic for migrant workers.

"They make jokes about it," Perez said. "They say, 'Go in the New River and you come out glowing.'"

Earlier this month, Border Patrol agent Matt Daly fell in while chasing a group of immigrants. He immediately went back to the station for a shower, then to a hospital for a hepatitis A vaccine and a polio booster shot.

"I got some in my mouth. It was a bad experience," he said.

At least 11 immigrants floated through the gap in the 12-foot steel border fence on Jan. 23. Wetjen said 75 made it the night before and 25 earlier that week.

Jose Luis Angel, who monitors the river for the state Water Resources Control Board, has photographed immigrants camouflaging themselves with the river's foam, piling it on their heads as they float downstream. Border agents have seen parents use the foam to hide their babies and older children.

About 20 minutes after the men passed Wetjen on the inner tube, he spotted them walking down a Calexico street in dry clothes. He stopped his vehicle, but they scattered when he got out. Wetjen caught one.

The one caught, Francisco Campos, said he is from Jalisco state on Mexico's Pacific coast. He had been headed for the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles to work. Campos, wearing a flannel work shirt, boots and a Denver Broncos baseball cap, said he had never heard of the New River until he arrived in Mexicali three days earlier.

"I didn't know it was dangerous," he said. "They said there's no current, but the current is really strong. And it's cold."

Campos was returned to Mexico with a warning that he shower and change clothes to avoid getting sick.

## Classification

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Language: English

**Subject:** BORDER CONTROL (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (88%); IMMIGRATION (88%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (86%); RIVERS (85%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (85%); WATER POLLUTION (85%); NONPOINT SOURCE POLLUTION (67%); LAKES (62%); AGRICULTURAL POLLUTION (62%)

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ENTER WATER

**Company:** BANK OF NEW YORK MELLON CORP (92%); BANK OF NEW YORK MELLON CORP (92%);  
TWO **BORDER PATROL** (90%)

**Organization:** TWO **BORDER PATROL** (90%)

**Ticker:** BK (NYSE) (92%)

**Industry:** AGRICULTURAL **POLLUTION** (62%)

**Geographic:** SAN DIEGO, CA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); **UNITED STATES** (92%); MEXICO (79%);  
NORTH AMERICA (79%)

**Load-Date:** January 31, 2000