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What are 'zombie wells'? 5 things to know about Texas oil wells threatening Texas groundwater

By **Amanda Drane**, *Staff Writer*

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A drone image of an out-of-commission pump jack spills out oil and water on Schuyler Wight's ranch on Tuesday, April 25, 2023, near Imperial.

Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer



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What are 'zombie wells'? 5 things to know about Texas oil wells threatening Texas groundwater

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Leaking wells have become a scourge on Texas oil fields as the state contends with two overlapping issues: surging numbers of unplugged orphan wells left behind by bankrupt operators, and a growing number of decades-old plugs failing to hold up against new pressures mounting underground.

The two related problems — uncapped orphan wells and plugged wells failing, known as “zombie wells” — threaten Texas groundwater. Oil, fluids and the



What are 'zombie wells'?

They are wells that should be plugged but are coming back to life and spewing toxic water. Regulations require oil and gas operators to plug wells with cement when they are finished with them, but a growing number of decades-old plugs are failing to hold up against new pressures mounting underground. An October 2024 geyser that flowed from an old well affiliated with Kinder Morgan was one recent example of the phenomenon.

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THE LATEST: Texas added nearly 1,400 orphaned oil wells to its list this year

How dangerous are zombie wells?

The water coming from these wells can contain high levels of salt, benzene, oil and other chemicals, endangering layers of protected groundwater that the well cuts

through. In some cases, like last year's geyser, poisonous gases including hydrogen sulfide also come up with the water, endangering nearby residents.

How many are there?

Hundreds of thousands of decades-old wells dot the Texas landscape, and just how many of them could be leaking is unknown. In Reeves County alone, the site of last year's geyser, a new study identified roughly 600 orphaned, idle and poorly plugged wells that are at high risk of leaking.

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Not all zombie wells erupt to the surface as dramatically as last year's geyser — some trickle to the surface like black streams — but there is a growing body of

evidence that suggests wells plugged decades ago are failing more frequently.

Are zombie wells the same as orphaned wells?

The words mean different things, but they point to overlapping issues. Both can leak, but zombie wells were plugged; orphaned wells were not. An orphaned well is an uncapped hole in the ground left by an operator that has dissolved or gone bankrupt — a pathway for leaks left behind for the state to handle. Zombie wells were laid to rest long ago, but their cement plugs have since failed, allowing them to spring back to life with toxic water.

What are regulators doing to address the issue?

The increasing number of water blowouts has challenged the Texas Railroad Commission, which has made recent efforts to tackle the issue.

Last year's geyser in Reeves County helped usher in a new wave of reform at the Railroad Commission. The revised permitting guidelines for underground wastewater injection, which took effect June 1, aim to prevent the oil industry's wastewater from leaking into old wells and causing more saltwater blowouts in the future. Before granting new permits for wastewater disposal wells, a newly

established 2-mile radius forces companies to locate vulnerable wells that could carry their water to the surface.

The reforms focus on the two primary modes of containment failure: identifying nearby wells that could allow the fluids to leak, and preventing operators from fracturing the reservoir's upper and lower "confining" intervals — the non-porous formations that hold the water in place.



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FAR ENOUGH? A toxic geyser blew sky-high in West Texas. New rules that followed wouldn't stop the next one.

Additionally, a new law requires that wells be plugged after 15 years of inactivity. Oil and gas companies are legally responsible for plugging their own wells, but smaller

operators often go bankrupt before they are able to, leaving the state to pick up the tab. To address the issue, lawmakers and industry groups pushed for a bill that forces oil and gas companies to plug the wells while they are still around to do the work.

The commission also received more than \$100 million in new funds from the Legislature to plug a growing number of “emergency” wells and to hire a team to investigate the root causes of water blowouts and earthquakes.

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Amanda Drane

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER, ENERGY



Amanda Drane is an investigative reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

Her work covering leaking oil and gas wells has won national recognition, including a first-place award for excellence in science reporting from the Online News Association in 2025.

Amanda’s work on so-called “zombie wells” – long-dead oil and gas wells bursting with toxic water – received top honors in the Texas Managing Editors awards and helped inform a growing movement to reform how Houston’s oil and gas industry is regulated.

Coverage that Amanda contributed to won national and local awards in 2025. A project highlighting lax enforcement of poisonous gas leaking from oil and gas wells won top honors from the Society for Advancing Business Editing and Writing and was a semifinalist for the 2025 Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting. “Powerless,” the Chronicle’s package of stories that dug into how CenterPoint kept millions in the dark in the wake of Hurricane Beryl, was also a Goldsmith semifinalist and was recognized by The Headliners Foundation.

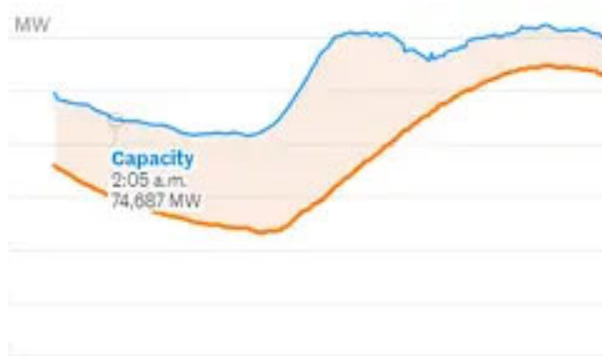
She enjoys yoga, strength training and eating well, thanks to her chef-husband.

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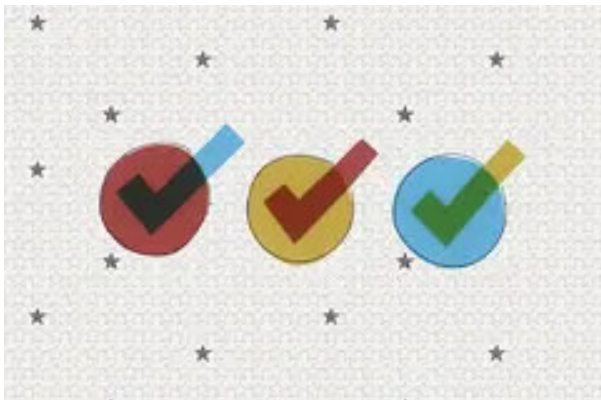
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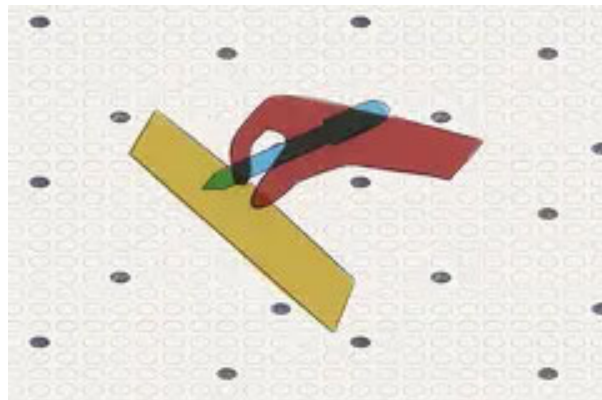
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