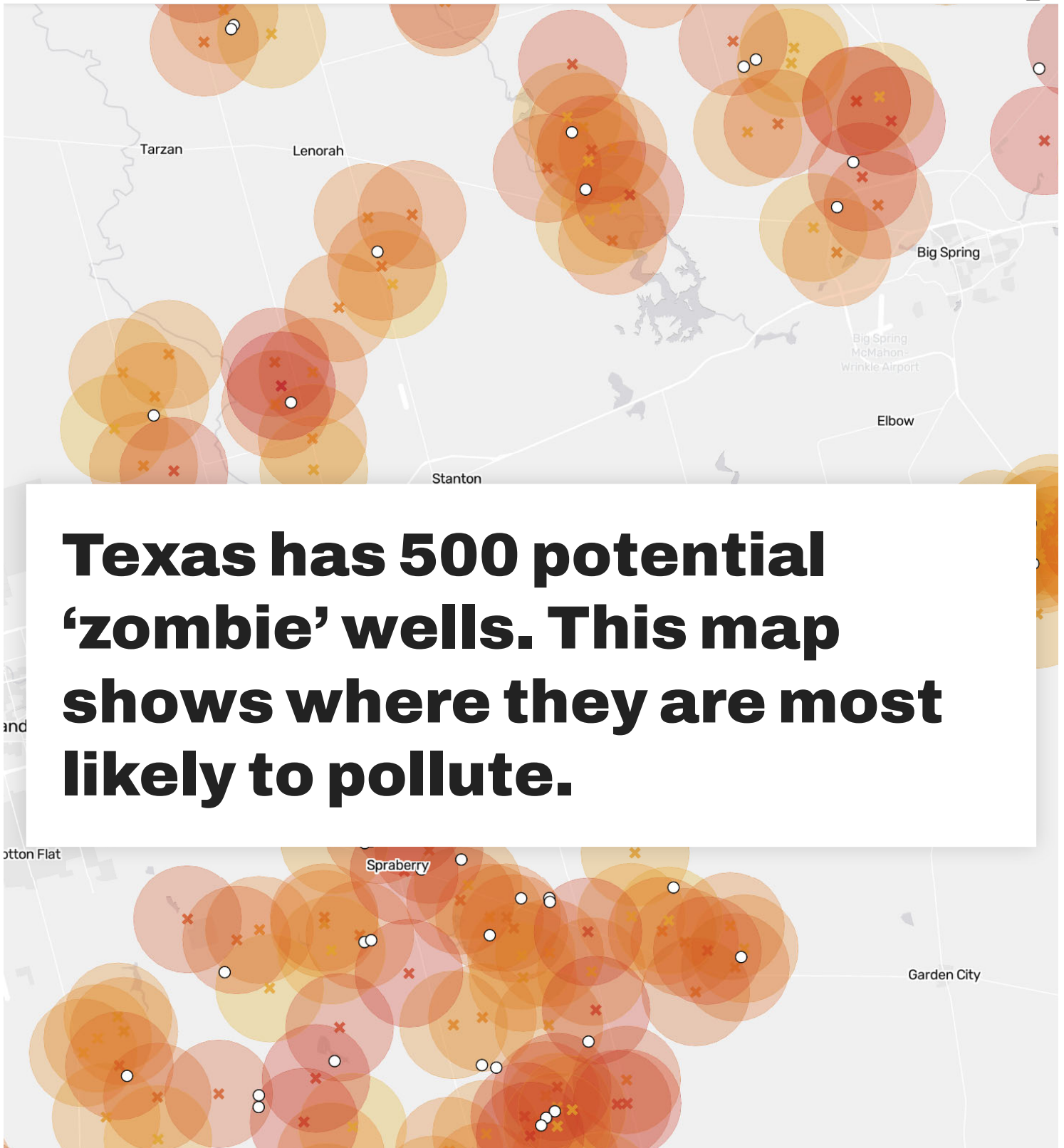




High-profile geysers gushing from old oil and gas wells have captured national attention in recent years, rattling the industry and its regulators. But these leaks can happen quietly, raising questions about just how many wells could be leaking across Texas.

In some cases, a well can leak underground, potentially poisoning aquifers without a sign at the surface that anything is amiss.

Two overlapping issues are driving the state's leaking well problem: the discovery of 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.

Pressure-driven wastewater from the oil industry, injected into disposal wells, is straining decades-old cement well plugs — often proving more than they can handle.

✗ is a wastewater well.

Water released during the process of extracting oil and gas is disposed of in the ground through these wells.

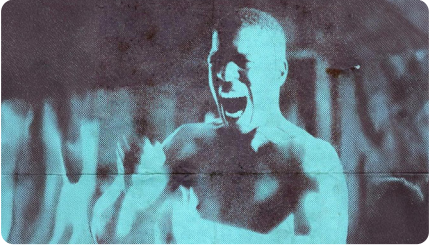
- **is an old, unmaintained oil well.**

We call these "at-risk" wells because when disposal wells are near unmaintained wells, wastewater can leak into them and trigger dangerous situations.

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The Texas Railroad Commission says vulnerable wells within 2 miles of disposal wells are at the highest risk.

A well can be at-risk if it is an orphan well, meaning it was left unplugged by operators who went bankrupt or dissolved. Wells inactive longer than 15 years and wells plugged pre-1970 are also at increased risk.

The more injection occurring at disposal wells near at-risk wells,
the higher the risk.

Disposal Well Injection Amount:



Though there are a lot of at-risk wells in West Texas, new data reveal the highest injection amounts around at-risk wells are in Guadalupe and Caldwell counties, east of Austin and San Antonio.

Near this at-risk well, over 300 million barrels, or 12.6 billion gallons, of wastewater has been injected underground since 2024.

Clusters of vulnerable wells dot the landscape in the Houston area, where wildcatters have produced oil for more than a century.

The data also show many at-risk wells along the Texas-Louisiana border, where oil and gas companies are disposing of wastewater from the Haynesville shale formation straddling the two states.

The Houston Chronicle, in partnership with [Data Desk](#), used publicly available Railroad Commission data to map thousands of wells at high risk of leaking. While existing maps identify orphaned and idle wells, this one pinpoints those unmaintained wells that are near operations in which oil and gas companies inject high volumes of their wastewater underground. Such proximity can trigger leaks.

The map also includes wells plugged before 1970 among the at-risk wells, as a growing number of these more than half-century old plugs are failing to hold up against modern pressures, creating what is [known as “zombie” wells](#).

The map includes 2,700 Texas wells at risk of leaking, including 500 potential zombie wells.

Disposal Well Injection Amount:

0.5 MMbbl

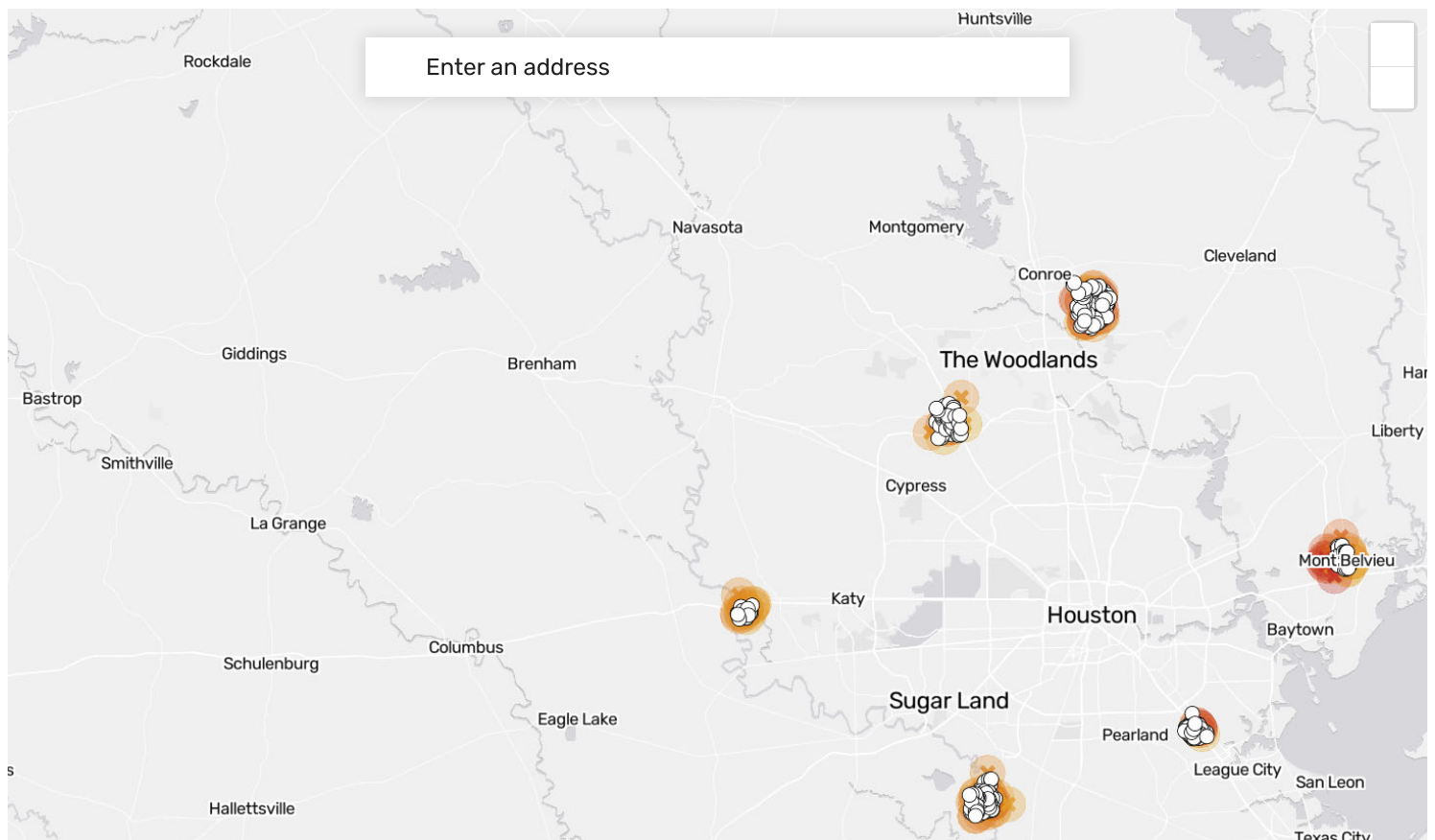
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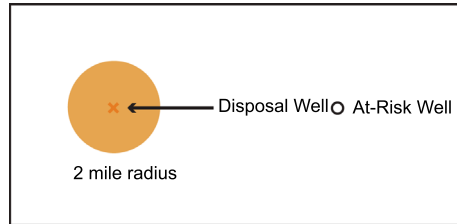
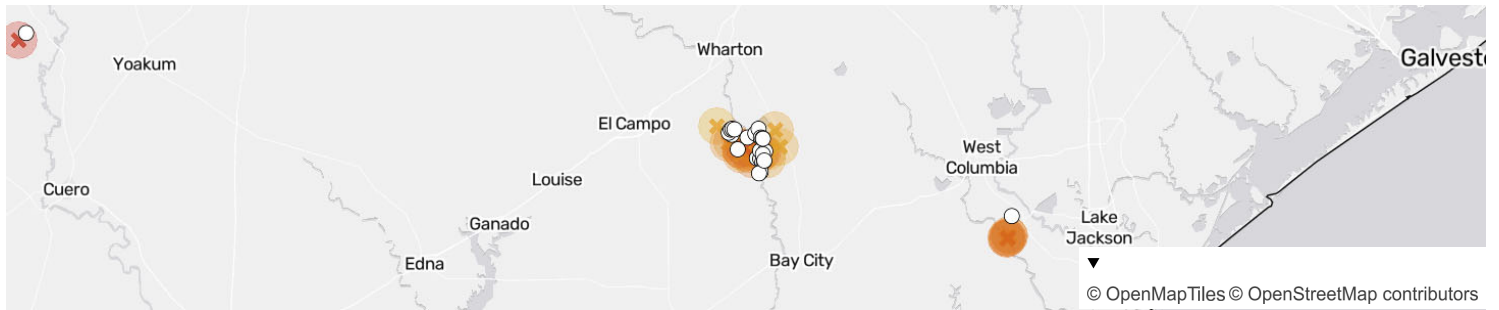
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Filter At-Risk Wells:

☒ Inactive 15+ years ☒ Orphan ☒ Plugged pre-1970 ☒ Multiple risks





Map: Katherine Oung • Source: Texas RRC, [Data Desk](#)

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The Legislature passed a new law last year that forces more operators to plug wells after 15 years of inactivity, lest they become unmaintained holes in the ground where toxic water can spring.

Meanwhile, the Railroad Commission revised permitting guidelines for underground wastewater injection. Effective June 2025, it established a 2-mile radius that forces companies to locate vulnerable wells that could carry their water to the surface.

But the permitting guidelines only apply to new disposal wells — not the thousands of injection and disposal wells already operating in Texas — and the new law doesn't immediately plug the thousands of orphaned and idle wells in Texas.

In fact, the state's orphan well problem is still growing. The number of orphaned wells across Texas reached over 11,000 at the end of 2025, breaking a 20-year record.

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About the data in this story

The Houston Chronicle sourced well data from the [Texas Railroad Commission](#) on January 28, 2025. Reporters collaborated with [Data Desk](#), an investigative research and analysis organization, to analyze data on well locations, characteristics and disposal amounts.

We define at-risk wells as orphan wells, wells that have been inactive for more than 15 years and wells plugged before 1970. Injection amounts are reported on the map in millions of barrels (MMbbl).

The higher the injection volume and the closer the wastewater disposal well is to at-risk wells, the higher the risk. That’s why our map only shows the disposal wells with the very largest injection volumes – in the 90th percentile relative to others in Texas. It also only shows at-risk wells and disposal wells that are within 2 miles of each other.

The Railroad Commission requires companies to identify vulnerable wells within a 2-mile radius of new wastewater disposal wells. We exclude wastewater disposal wells whose injection amounts are not reported by the commission or have had zero injection since 2024.

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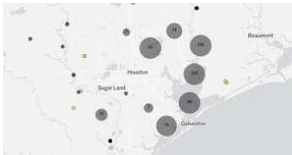
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Design and development by Katherine Oung. Reporting by Amanda Drane and Katherine Oung. Editing by Yaffa Fredrick, Caroline Ghisolfi and Robert Eckhart. Powered by the [Hearst Newspapers DevHub](#). [↗](#)

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