



Oil and Gas Reform

# California's Orphaned Wells



Joshua Tree National Park by Chris Moore

38,555

ORPHANED WELLS  
IN CALIFORNIA

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6,932

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NEAR NATIONAL  
PARKS SITES IN  
CALIFORNIA

## THE ISSUE

Orphaned oil and gas wells are a major concern for air and water quality and for their contribution to climate change. Due to a lack of sufficient financial incentives to ensure that oil and gas operators plug, remediate, and reclaim these wells, they are left leaking toxics into the environment and leave the clean-up job to taxpayers. Wells without accountable operators and dedicated funding to plug or reclaim them can sit unmonitored for decades. Increasingly, many companies go bankrupt and leave their wells behind and communities are left to deal with the aftermath.\*

Across the country, many orphaned wells are in rural communities on federal, state, Tribal, and private lands. These rural communities have experienced years of the boom and bust of the oil and gas industry, yet due to continued extractive oil and gas development, outdated policies, and a lack of oversight, they often carry the burden of cleanup and can suffer from health impacts of leaking orphaned wells polluting their air and groundwater.

## WHAT IS AN ORPHANED WELL?

An “orphaned” oil and gas well is a well that is not actively being used for authorized purposes, such as production, injection, or monitoring, and for which either no operator can be found, or the operator is unable to permanently plug the well and remediate and reclaim the well site. Federal, Tribal and state definitions vary for abandoned, idle and orphaned wells. There are anywhere between thousands to millions of unidentified orphaned wells depending on how the wells are defined.

## ORPHANED WELLS & NATIONAL PARKS IN CALIFORNIA

A new analysis by National Parks Conservation Association and FracTracker Alliance recently discovered that there are 214,538 orphaned wells across the country, 31,737 of which are within 30 miles of a National Park Site. This includes:

- 38,555 orphaned wells in California, 6,932 of which are within 30 miles of a National Park or Park Unit.
- 5,705 orphaned wells are within 30 miles of Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, in 1,920 orphaned wells overlapping with Channel Islands National Park.
- 50 orphaned wells are within 30 miles of Pinnacles National Park

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR PARKS & PEOPLE

The imminent threat of new oil and gas development, and the legacy threat that orphaned wells pose, threaten iconic park ecosystems and exacerbates the climate crisis. Orphaned and idle wells also contaminate groundwater, leak methane and other air pollutants that pose serious public health risks. These issues are especially prevalent in rural, Tribal and communities of color.

- The analysis shows there are 25,583 orphaned well sites in Kern County, alone, accounting for nearly 2/3 of all orphaned wells in California. While outside of the 30 mile investigation area, the number of orphaned wells is worth noting given nearly one million people live in Kern County, which has some of the worst air quality in the nation. People and communities who live near orphaned wells may suffer from respiratory problems such as asthma, eye/nose/throat irritation, frequent headaches, nausea, dizziness and general fatigue.
- It's also worth noting that the oil and gas development in Kern County is a key contributor to the region's poor air quality, and is part of the reason why nearby Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks have the worst air quality of any park unit.
- A 2013 NPS study found that 88% of visitors found clean air to be extremely important and an important attribute meriting protection. A 2018 report on U.S. national park visitation found that visitation drops by at least 8% when park pollution is high.

Orphaned wells left unplugged deteriorate over time and as similarly as they can contaminate surface and

groundwater supplies, they can also impair the many rivers and streams that can be core to the integrity of the park. Cleaning up orphan wells can enhance land restoration efforts, protecting the health and safety our wildlife, migratory birds, and residents and communities nearby this abandoned energy infrastructure.

### ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF CLEANUP

Cleaning up orphaned wells is not only good for the environment, it's also a job creator. A federal program to plug 500,000 orphaned wells could create as many as 120,000 jobs. Furthermore, it is an important down payment towards ensuring a just transition for legacy fossil fuel communities, enabling oil and gas workers to put their skillset to use.

### THE SOLUTION – NPCA SUPPORTS:

- The use of federal funding to plug orphaned wells on state, private, Tribal, and federal public lands through a grant program established by the Department of Interior,
- The establishment of a grant program by the Interior Secretary that provide funds to states and tribes to plug and reclaim wells on tribal, state, and privately owned lands, and
- Holding oil and gas companies accountable by eliminating nationwide bonds, increasing the minimum value of statewide bonds adjusted for inflation, and improving data collection to identify and remedy orphaned wells.

#### TAKE ACTION

*SUPPORT LEGISLATION THAT WOULD CLEAN UP ORPHANED WELLS AND CREATE JOBS WHILE ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND ENSURING THAT THE PUBLIC IS PROTECTED.*

*TELL YOUR REPRESENTATIVES TO COSPONSOR: **THE ORPHANED WELL CLEANUP AND JOBS ACT** and*

*TELL YOUR SENATORS TO COSONPSOR: **THE OIL AND GAS BONDING REFORM AND ORPHANED WELL REMEDIATION ACT.***

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\* <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-615.pdf>