

A wide-angle photograph of a flat, golden-brown field under a dramatic, cloudy sky. In the distance, a black oil pumpjack stands on the horizon.

ORPHAN WELLS

AN UNSEEN DANGER ACROSS THE COUNTRY

“Orphan wells” are oil and gas wells that have been left behind by their owner and are no longer in service. That doesn’t mean they’ve been plugged or cleaned up, though. They continue to spew pollution into our air, water, and climate— pollution that harms people’s health. These wells are all over the country in building basements, farm fields, forests, waterways, around homes, and even in schools. They may well be in your own neighborhood.

What is an orphan well?

An orphan well is an unplugged oil and gas well for which a responsible party no longer exists.

Instead of plugging the well and repairing the surrounding land, oil and gas companies walk away and leave these unplugged wells spewing pollution. Orphan wells become the responsibility of the government (federal, state, or Tribal) to clean up, often at taxpayer expense.

Why should we care about them?

Orphan wells contribute to the climate crisis while putting the health and safety of those who live nearby at risk.

Orphan wells can leak oil, gas, and other toxic chemicals into our air and water. They can also emit methane, a powerful contributor to climate change.

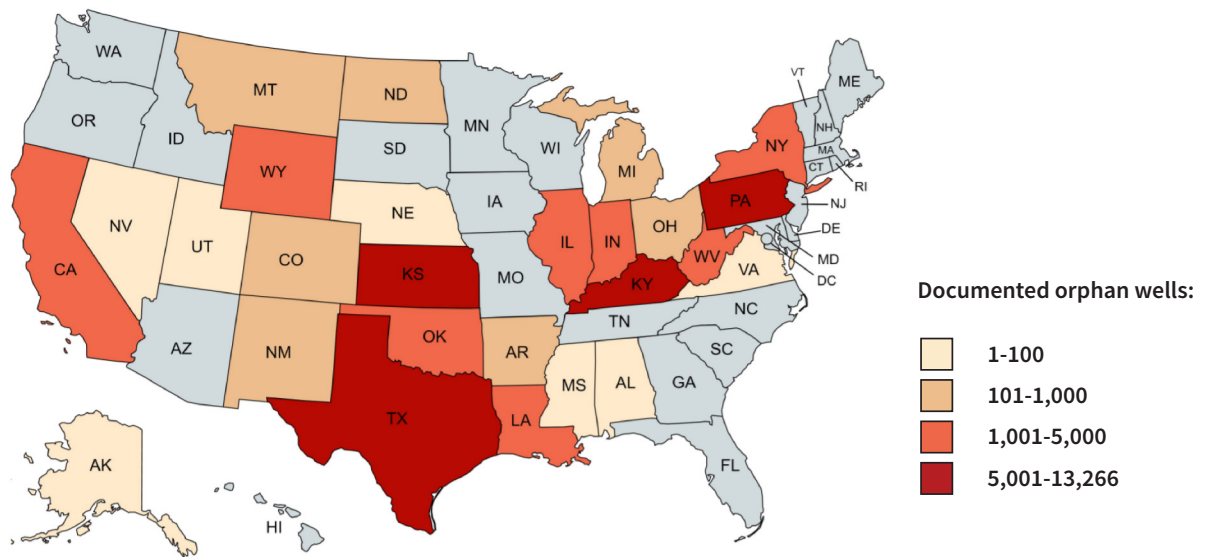
For far too long, children who live, learn, or play near orphan wells have been disproportionately impacted by methane and other harmful pollution that puts their health and safety at risk.



Many orphan wells across the country are close to people’s homes, like this one in Pennsylvania. Photo: PA Department of Environmental Protection

Orphan wells can be a major source of methane pollution which is a potent greenhouse gas accelerating climate change. A recent U.N. report found that cutting methane emissions is the “strongest lever” humanity has to slow climate change this decade and keep warming below catastrophic levels.

THE UNSEEN DANGER OF ORPHAN WELLS



Where do orphan wells exist?

There are more than 56,000 documented orphaned wells located in 26 states across the country, but this is just the tip of the iceberg as many older wells were drilled without proper documentation or record keeping.

Research suggests that the true number of orphan wells could be more than a million.

Who is responsible for cleaning up?

Orphan wells result when oil and gas companies don't clean up after themselves when they've left a drilling site. Sometimes they're bankrupt. Instead of plugging the well and repairing the surrounding land, they walk away, leaving wells leaking. Government agencies responsible for well plugging often face funding shortfalls, and many orphaned wells remain unplugged.

THE SOLUTION

We need the federal government to invest in bold, ambitious climate change solutions that include funding to plug orphan wells. Plugging orphan wells will create tens of thousands of good-paying jobs while helping to clean up pollution and protect the climate and public health.

Moms Clean Air Force is eager to work on reforms and policies that will protect communities and our climate from the oil and gas industry's legacy pollution.

Learn more and send a message to your lawmakers on our website: www.momscleanairforce.org.



An orphan well in St. Martin Parish, Louisiana.