

Federal program offers tribes chance to turn “orphan” oil and gas wells into environmental and economic opportunity

By: Eric Kills a Hundred

Since oil and gas extraction began in the 1800's, over four million wells have been drilled in 30 U.S. states. Oil and gas wells can remain active for many years, but eventually they will need to be properly closed. When that doesn't happen and wells have no identifiable owner, they are considered “orphan wells” – and these orphans pose serious health, environmental and economic threats.

Analysis from Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) also finds that orphan wells disproportionately impact tribal communities, which tend to live closer to orphan wells than would be expected based on census data.

The harmful impacts of orphan wells manifest in several ways:

- They emit pollutants such as methane, a dangerous greenhouse gas which can explode in high enough concentrations.
- The EPA estimates that orphan wells are responsible for up to .3% of ALL U.S. climate emissions.
- They're a source of air toxins such as hydrogen sulfide and cancer-causing benzene .
- Ground and surface water can be contaminated by orphan wells.
- Finally, orphan wells reduce property values and limit alternative land and subsurface usage.

The problems created by orphan wells also present tribes with economic and environmental opportunities – and \$150M in new federal funding to help unlock them.

The REGROW Act sponsored by Sen. Lujan (NM) and Sen. Cramer (ND) and included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law dedicates \$150M for tribal orphan wells remediation. This Department of Interior-administered funding may be used for tribes to start an orphan wells program, or support an existing tribal orphan wells program. Additionally, the Department of Energy has \$30M for finding unmapped orphans and has been specifically tasked to work with tribes. Recognizing the weight of centuries of disparate impacts, both the DOI closure funding and the DOE orphan wells mapping program place an emphasis on working with tribes.

EDF has produced a [map of documented orphan wells](#) across the country, which may be useful. If you know of orphan wells that are not reflected here, please let us know so we can improve available data about the problem.

Another resource to take advantage of is EDF orphan wells expert [Adam Peltz](#), who has worked extensively on the issue and last month [testified](#) before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources. In his advocacy, Peltz has insisted tribes be consulted, heard and included. When I ask Peltz if he would speak with a tribe on the issue, he responded, “I will speak with any tribe, any time, for free about orphan wells.”

Please reach out if EDF can be a resource to your tribe in accessing resources to clean up orphan wells or identify them in your area. You can reach me at ekillsahundred@edf.org.