

IDLE WELLS, ACTIVE THREAT

California schools, hospitals, playgrounds in shadow of unplugged wells

California has more than 30,000 idle wells, which are unplugged but no longer produce oil or gas. A Center for Biological Diversity analysis found that 4,449 idle wells are concerning close to nearly 3,800 schools, childcare centers, eldercare centers, hospitals, parks, and playgrounds — places meant to be safe. Idle wells can leak explosive gases and toxic chemicals that put children, seniors, and patients at risk. Yet oil and gas companies statewide have provided bonds for less than 1% of the money needed to clean up their old wells.

Idle wells threaten the air we breathe and the water we drink.

- Our analysis found that 1,040 parks and playgrounds, 903 healthcare facilities, 724 childcare centers, 616 schools and 504 eldercare centers are within 3,200 feet of at least one idle well. California has prohibited new oil and gas drilling within a 3,200-foot “[health protection zone](#)” of these sites.
- More than [350,000](#) Californians live near idle wells.
- Children, seniors, and patients are especially [sensitive](#) to pollutants emitted by oil and gas facilities, including some idle wells.
- At least 82% of idle wells are located above groundwater sources, including many that supply drinking water. A [2019 study](#) found that 21% of sampled water wells near a San Joaquin Valley oilfield contained [benzene](#), a toxic gas linked to various types of cancer, as well as lung and brain harms. Gases may have migrated from leaky idle wells into groundwater.

Idle wells can leak methane, which threatens safety and worsens the climate crisis.

- A [2020 study](#) found that 65% of idle wells sampled in California were leaking methane, a greenhouse gas with 80 times the heating power of carbon dioxide over a 20-year period, and explosive at high concentrations. In 2025 at least [one](#) well spewed enough methane to be a “[super-emitter](#).” At least [15 idle wells](#) in Kern County were found to be leaking explosive levels of methane in 2023, including three within 1,050 feet of a school and a home.
- California’s patchwork [monitoring](#) requirements rely on [industry self-reporting](#), so leakages may be more widespread than we know.

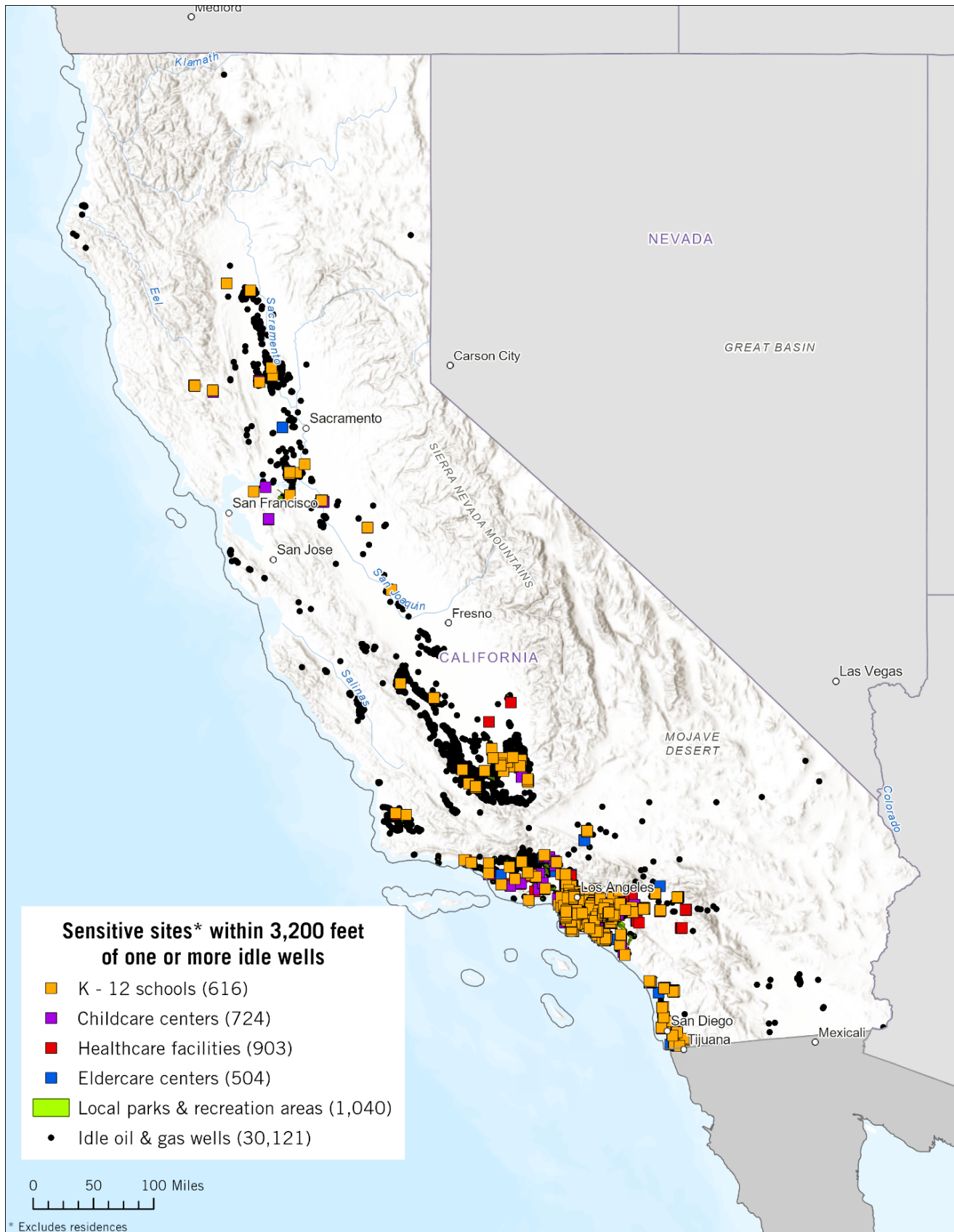
Idle wells are a colossal financial risk for Californians.

- Plugging California’s oil and gas wells could cost [\\$21.5 billion](#). Oil and gas companies are legally required to plug their wells but have provided just \$106 million in bonds for onshore plugging. If regulators don’t make polluters pay, it will cost taxpayers an estimated \$1,500 per household to clean up the industry’s toxic mess.

How can legislators build on recent [improvements](#) in California’s idle well laws to solve this?

- Speed up plugging of deserted idle wells and recoup the costs from oil and gas companies, prioritizing wells closest to sensitive sites.
- Require frequent methane monitoring of idle wells and close policy loopholes that allow leaks to go undetected, so leaking wells are promptly plugged.
- Ensure that oil and gas operators fully clean up the wellsite and address soil and water contamination.

To see if a sensitive site near you is close to an idle well, visit our interactive map at biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/idle-wells-threaten-California/.



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