# IDLE WELLS, ACTIVE THREAT

## 100-Plus Kern County schools, hospitals, playgrounds in shadow of unplugged wells

About two-thirds of California's 30,000-plus idle wells, which are unplugged but no longer produce oil or gas, are in Kern County. A Center for Biological Diversity analysis found that 461 idle wells are concerningly close to at least 126 schools, hospitals, childcare centers, eldercare centers, parks, and playgrounds — places meant to be safe. Idle wells can leak explosive gases and toxic chemicals, putting children, seniors, patients, and over 16,000 students at risk in the county. 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 34 parks and playgrounds, 34 healthcare facilities, 26 K-12 schools, 17 childcare centers, and 15 eldercare centers are within 3,200 feet of at least one idle well. California recently prohibited new oil and gas drilling within a 3,200-foot "health protection zone" of these sites.
- Children, seniors, and patients are especially sensitive to pollutants emitted by oil and gas facilities, including some idle wells.
- At least 37% of Kern County's idle wells have been unplugged for more than eight[1] years, and 9% have been unplugged for more than 20 years. Aging wells pose a higher risk of leaking chemicals.
- 95% of Kern County's 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 Kern County 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 leaked 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.

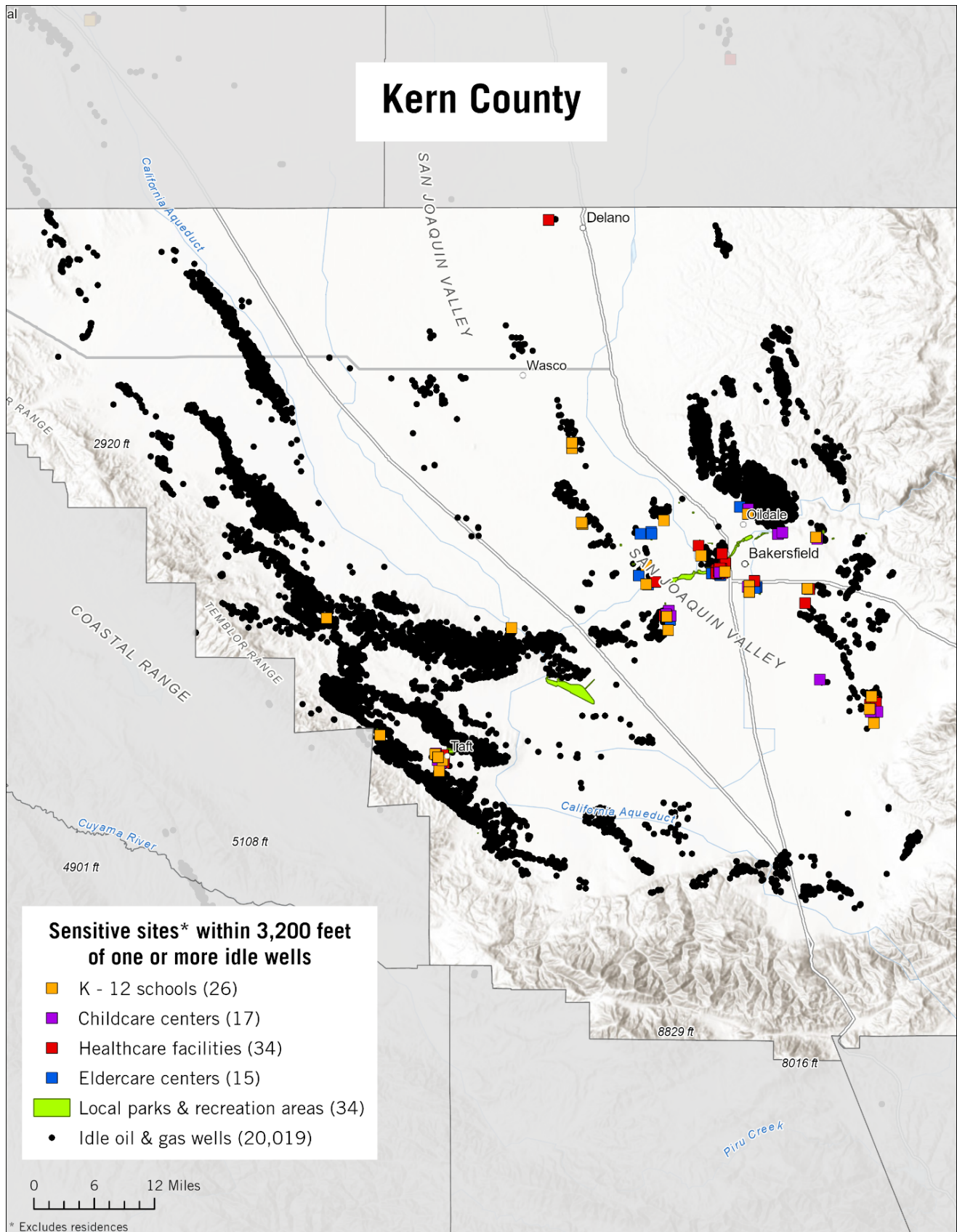### *Idle wells are a colossal financial risk for Kern County residents and all Californians.*
- Oil and gas companies are legally required to plug their wells. In inland California, where most wells are in Kern County, this will cost $14.9 billion. Statewide, companies have provided just $106 million in bonds for plugging onshore wells. 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 deserted 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.

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[1] California law defines any well that has been idle for eight or more years as a long term idle well. When prioritizing wells for elimination, operators must consider an idle well's age.

To learn about our methodology, visit
biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/idle-wells-threaten-California/methodology

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# Kern County

**Sensitive sites\* within 3,200 feet of one or more idle wells**

- 🟧 K - 12 schools (26)
- 🟪 Childcare centers (17)
- 🟥 Healthcare facilities (34)
- 🟦 Eldercare centers (15)
- 🟩 Local parks & recreation areas (34)
- • Idle oil & gas wells (20,019)

0     6     12 Miles

\* Excludes residences

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