

IDLE WELLS, ACTIVE THREAT

Thousands of LA County schools, hospitals, playgrounds in shadow of unplugged wells

Los Angeles County has at least 3,348 idle wells, which are unplugged but no longer produce oil or gas. A Center for Biological Diversity analysis found that 86%, totaling 2,886 idle wells, are concerning close to schools, hospitals, childcare centers, eldercare centers, parks, and playgrounds — places meant to be safe. Many idle wells have been unplugged for more than a century. They can leak explosive gases and toxic chemicals, putting children, seniors, patients, and over 230,000 students 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 657 healthcare facilities, 598 parks and playgrounds, 526 childcare centers, 412 K-12 schools, and 262 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 77% of LA County’s idle wells have been unplugged for more than eight¹ years. Nearly one-third have been unplugged for over a century, and over 90% of those are in the city of LA. Aging idle wells pose a higher [risk](#) of leaking chemicals.
- At least 60% of idle wells sit above groundwater sources, including many that supply drinking water. Idle wells can act as [pollution pathways](#) for harmful chemicals like [benzene](#), a toxic gas linked to various types of cancer, to leak into [drinking water sources](#).

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 the communities of West Carson and Signal Hill leaked methane in 2022.
- 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 LA County residents and all Californians.

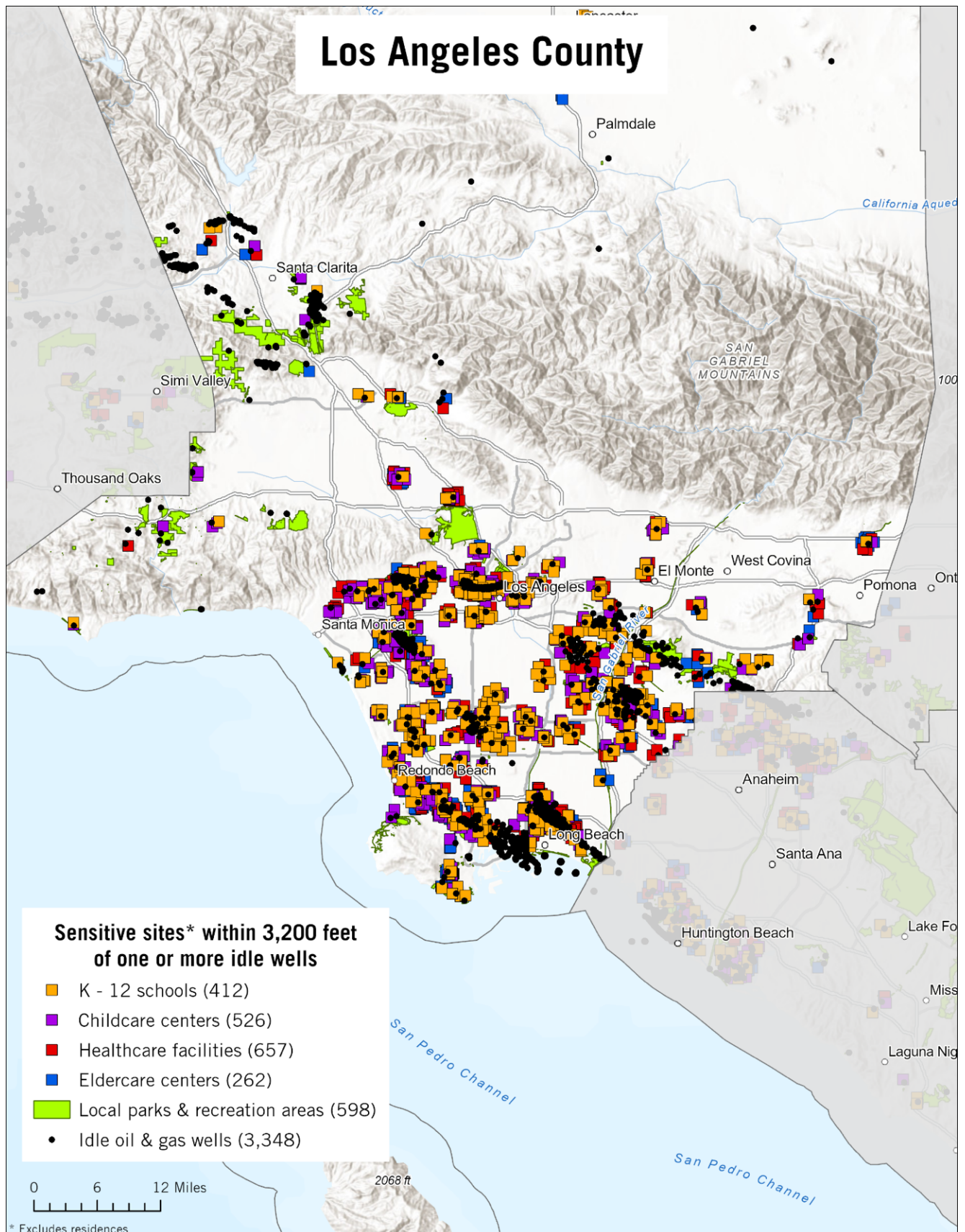
- Oil and gas companies are legally required to plug their wells. In the LA Basin, this will cost about [\\$2.7 billion](#). Statewide, companies have promised just \$106 million in bonds for onshore plugging. If regulators don’t make polluters pay, it will cost taxpayers an estimated \$1,500 per household 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 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.

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 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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