

IDLE WELLS, ACTIVE THREAT

Hundreds of Monterey County unplugged wells sit on groundwater sources

Monterey County has at least 474 idle wells, which are unplugged but no longer produce oil or gas. A Center for Biological Diversity analysis found that 97% of these wells are located above groundwater sources, including many that supply drinking water to residents and irrigation water to farmers. At least 168 Monterey County idle wells have been unplugged for more than 10 years. 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 459 out of 474 idle wells in Monterey County are located above groundwater sources. Groundwater supplies about 95% of the county's water.
- About 12% of Monterey County's oil and gas wells are within 200 feet of a river or creek. This includes the Salinas River, which runs through the San Ardo Oil Field, and is a critical source of the county's groundwater.
- At least 35% of the county's idle wells have been unplugged for more than eight¹ years, and nearly 10% have been unplugged for more than 20 years. Aging wells pose a higher risk of leaking chemicals.
- Idle wells can act as pollution pathways for harmful chemicals like benzene, a toxic gas linked to various types of cancer, to leak into water sources. Water contamination is already a serious concern in Monterey County.

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."
- Leaks from Monterey County's idle wells may go undetected due to California's patchwork monitoring requirements that rely on industry self-reporting. In neighboring Kern County, at least 15 idle wells leaked explosive levels of methane in 2023, including three within 1,050 feet of a school and a home.

Idle wells are a colossal financial risk for Monterey County residents and all Californians.

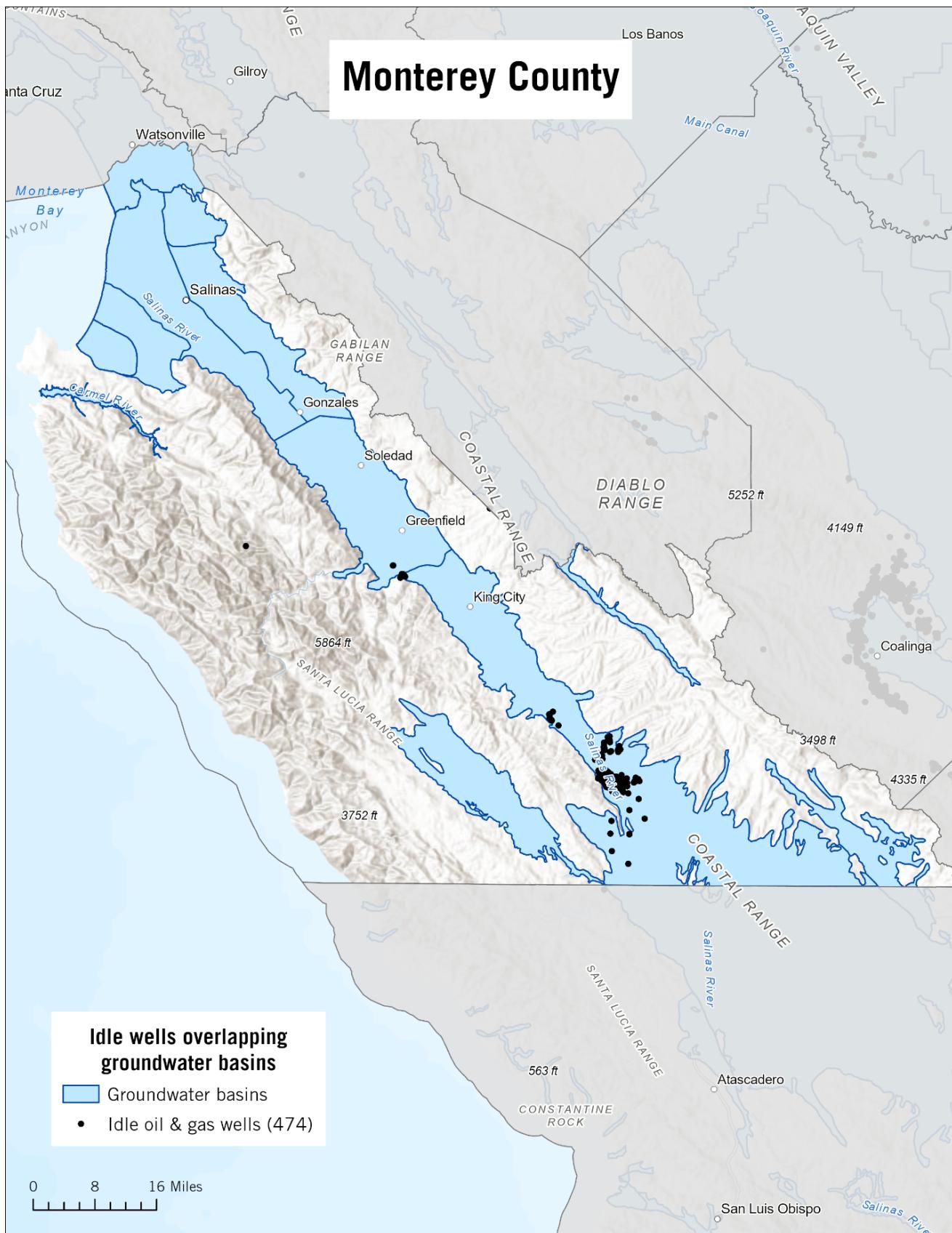
- Oil and gas companies are legally required to plug their wells. In Coastal California, which includes Monterey County, this will cost about \$3 billion. Statewide, companies have provided just \$106 million in bonds for onshore plugging. If regulators don't make polluters pay, it will cost taxpayers 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 deserted wells and recoup the costs from oil and gas companies.
- Require bonds or other financial assurance from oil and gas companies that are sufficient to pay for plugging and cleanup costs.
- 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 remediate 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.

Visit our interactive map of idle wells at biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/idle-wells-threaten-California/.



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