

IDLE WELLS, ACTIVE THREAT

Dozens of Santa Barbara County schools, playgrounds, hospitals in shadow of unplugged wells

Santa Barbara County is plagued by more than 1,200 idle wells, which are unplugged but no longer produce oil or gas. A Center for Biological Diversity analysis found that at least 152 idle wells are concerningly close to 24 schools, hospitals, childcare centers, eldercare centers, parks, and playgrounds — places meant to be safe. Idle wells can leak toxic chemicals into the air and water, and many wells have been idle for decades. 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 11 parks and playgrounds, four K-12 schools, four childcare centers, four healthcare facilities, and one eldercare center 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.
- Children, seniors, and patients are especially [sensitive](#) to pollutants emitted by oil and gas facilities, including some idle wells.
- At least 66% of Santa Barbara County’s idle wells have been unplugged for more than eight¹ years, and nearly half have been unplugged for more than 20 years. Aging idle wells pose a higher [risk](#) of leaking chemicals.
- 83% of the county’s idle wells are located 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](#).”
- A [2021 report](#) noted emissions from idle wells in Santa Barbara County, but many leakages may go undetected due to 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 Santa Barbara residents and all Californians.

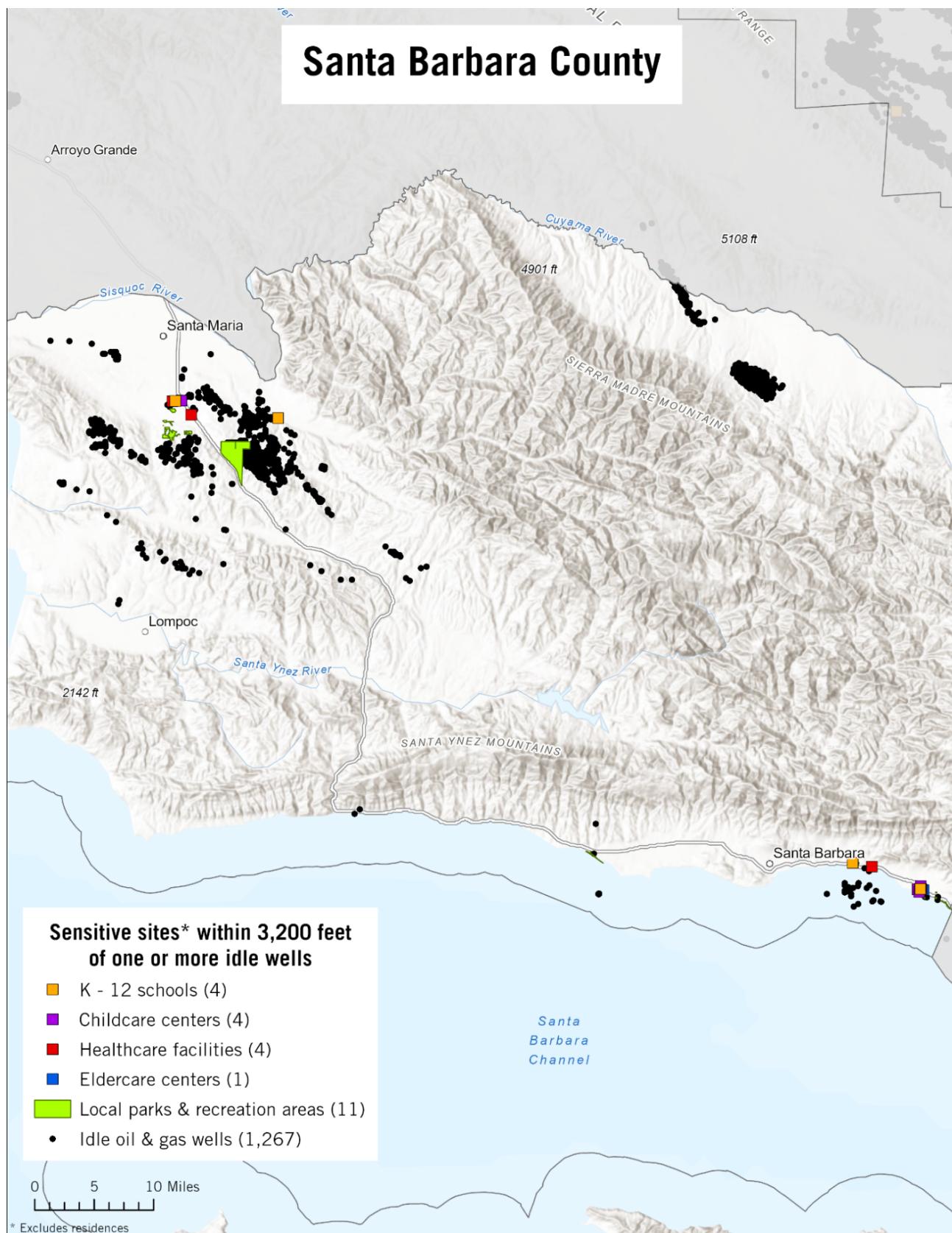
- The oil and gas industry is legally required to plug their wells. In Coastal California, including Santa Barbara County, this will cost [\\$3 billion](#). Statewide, industry has provided just \$106 million in bonds for onshore plugging. If regulators don’t make polluters pay, it will cost taxpayers 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, 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 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.

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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