

IDLE WELLS, ACTIVE THREAT

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

Ventura County has more than 1,400 idle wells, which are unplugged but no longer produce oil or gas. A Center for Biological Diversity analysis found that 244 idle wells are concerning close to at least 119 schools, hospitals, childcare centers, eldercare centers, parks, and playgrounds. Idle wells can leak toxic chemicals into the air and water, and many Ventura County wells have been idle for more than a century. 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 57 parks and playgrounds, 29 healthcare facilities, 13 childcare centers, 11 eldercare centers, and nine K-12 schools 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 sensitive sites.
- Children, seniors, and patients are especially [sensitive](#) to pollutants emitted by oil and gas facilities, including some idle wells.
- At least 79% of the Ventura County’s idle wells have been unplugged for more than eight¹ years, and nearly 12% have been unplugged for more than a century. Aging idle wells pose a higher [risk](#) of leaking chemicals.
- At least 15% of 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](#).”
- Leaks from idle wells in Ventura County 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 Ventura County residents and all Californians.

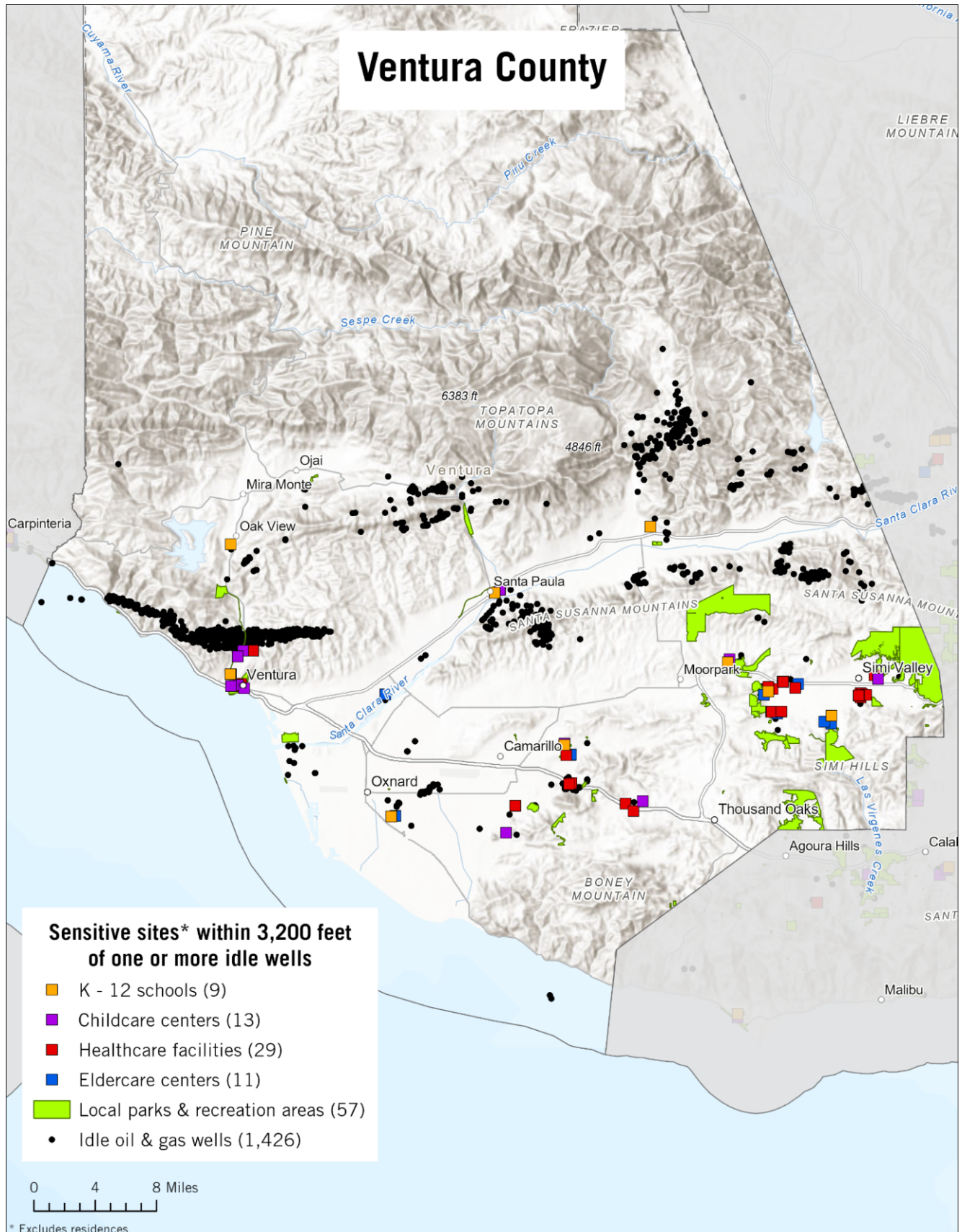
- Oil and gas companies are legally required to plug their wells. In Coastal California, which includes Ventura County, this will cost about [\\$3 billion](#). Statewide, industry has provided just \$106 million in bonds for onshore plugging. If regulators don’t make polluters pay, it will cost taxpayers 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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