

Landowner's Guide to Orphan Well Plugging

<http://ohiodnr.com/mineral/orphanwell/tabid/10376/default.aspx>

An improperly abandoned oil and gas well on your property may be a hazard to the environment and your health and safety. Recognizing an "orphan" or abandoned well and what can be done to properly plug it is important.

How will I know if I have a leaking abandoned oil and gas well on my property?

These oil and gas wells have been found under buildings, houses and streets, as well as in lawns and recreation areas. Some of the signs you may notice are:

- large diameter pipe or wellhead
- an area where vegetation will not grow
- the odor of crude oil or natural gas
- water well contaminated by saltwater, crude oil or natural gas

Saltwater contamination may increase water hardness or inhibit freezing. Crude oil may appear as either a thick layer or thin "rainbow" sheen on the water surface. Natural gas in a water well may be signaled by:

- pressure surges
- a natural gas odor at the tap
- bubbling in the water

Who is responsible for plugging oil and gas wells in Ohio?

Ohio law requires the well owner to plug and abandon any well which cannot produce oil or gas in commercial amounts, except wells that are used for a domestic supply. The owner of a well is the person or company who has the right to produce the oil and natural gas.

What is the Orphan Well Program?

The Orphan Well Program was established in 1977 to plug improperly abandoned oil and natural gas wells. Funded by a portion of the state tax on oil and gas production, Ohio's program has plugged more than a thousand wells and is recognized as one of the best in the nation.

Proper plugging of orphan wells is necessary to protect public health and safety, conserve natural resources, and allow the efficient development of Ohio's oil and gas resources.

Four separate programs are used to plug these wells:

- **Emergency Services Program** is used when a sudden problem threatens physical harm to the public. For example, if an abandoned well near a house or school suddenly begins to release natural gas in explosive amounts, the problem could be addressed quickly through this program. Only wells that are an immediate hazard qualify for plugging through this program.
- **Traditional Program** is used to plug wells that do not qualify for emergency action. These wells are grouped by priority and geographic location for state contract bid.
- **Landowner Grant Program** allows prequalified landowners to act as the general contractor to plug and restore the well through a well-plugging contractor, then be reimbursed for 100 percent of the reasonable costs. Wells plugged under this program are selected on a priority basis until all the funds for the year are spent. To qualify, the landowner must submit an application and provide a plugging plan that is approved by the Orphan Well Program.

- **Cost-Share Grants** are also available to local governments for wells on public property.

What happens after a complaint is filed?

The division will investigate each complaint to determine if the well qualifies for the Orphan Well Program. To qualify, a well must be verified as an oil and gas well and

1. have no legal owner with the money to plug the well
2. the state has forfeited the owner's surety bond

An inspector must be able to observe and document the condition of the well during a site visit. The division does not excavate property to look for abandoned wells. Instead, it is the landowner's responsibility to locate and expose the well for inspection. The inspector then completes a title search at the county courthouse to determine the legal owner. If an owner is found, the division will require the owner to plug the well.

How long does it take the Orphan Well Program to plug a well once a complaint is filed?

Throughout the process, staff members of the Orphan Well Program communicate with the landowner to address questions or concerns.

The time from filing the complaint to plugging the well varies depending on the program. Wells may be plugged through the Emergency Services Program in five to ten business days. Wells plugged under the Landowner Grant Program must be plugged within six months of the permit being issued. Wells plugged through the Traditional Program may take five or more years depending on the safety ranking of the well.

Who actually plugs the well?

The Division of Mineral Resources Management awards a contract to the lowest qualified bidder who has experience in oil and gas well drilling and plugging.

What is the plugging contractor's normal work schedule?

Contractors generally work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, unless all parties agree otherwise.

What type of equipment will the plugging contractor use?

The contractor will use a rig that weighs about 16 tons and is about 40 feet high. Along with the rig, one or more steel tanks measuring 20 feet by six feet will be used to hold liquids during the plugging process. A registered saltwater (brine) hauler will then remove these wastes for disposal at a permitted injection well. The inspector will talk to the landowner about the location of utilities, drain tiles and other information that will be useful in choosing the best access route.

Why am I asked to sign a landowner waiver?

Ohio law gives the state authority to enter properties to plug wells. The waiver is a record of your consent to allow state contractors to enter your property and plug the well.

Who oversees the plugging operation?

An inspector with the Division of Mineral Resources Management will be present during phases of the plugging procedure to ensure compliance with the contract.

How long will the plugging operation last?

The plugging procedure may last from one day to six weeks with the usual being one to two weeks.

What should I do if a well plugged by the Orphan Well Program begins to leak again?

Contact the division and an inspector will promptly review the condition of the well. After the site inspection and a review of the records, staff will determine if the well should be plugged again or vented to remove any concerns for safety.