



BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
AGENDA LETTER

Agenda Number:

Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
105 E. Anapamu Street, Suite 407
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 568-2240

Department Name: Board of Supervisors
Department No.: 011
For Agenda Of: September 16, 2025
Placement: Administrative
Estimated Time:
Continued Item: No
If Yes, date from:
Vote Required: Majority

TO: Board of Supervisors
FROM: Department Bob Nelson, Fourth District Office
Director(s)
Contact Info: Aaron Hanke, Chief of Staff (805) 346-8422
SUBJECT: Direction to report on the status of orphaned and idle wells in the County of Santa Barbara

County Counsel Concurrence

As to form: Yes

Auditor-Controller Concurrence

As to form: Yes

Recommended Actions:

That the Board of Supervisors:

- a) Direct the Santa Barbara County Planning Department, Community Services Department, and Environmental Health Services to provide a comprehensive status report on the number, location, and condition of orphaned and idle oil and gas wells in Santa Barbara County, along with any current plans for their abandonment, by October 14, 2025; and
- b) Determine that the above actions are organizational or administrative activities of the government that will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment and are not a project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to section 15378(b)(5) of the CEQA Guidelines.

Summary:

On May 13, 2025, the Board of Supervisors voted to prohibit new oil and gas operations and to begin phasing out existing operations, directing staff to prepare a framework for further consideration later this year. While the Fourth District did not support that motion, it is clear that the majority of the Board is pursuing this policy direction. Therefore, the Fourth District requests that equal effort and attention be dedicated to the environmental challenges created by the large inventory of orphaned and idle wells in Santa Barbara County. These wells present significant risks to public health, groundwater, and surrounding ecosystems, and their eventual abandonment will require substantial financial resources. By obtaining a clear, data-driven assessment of the scope of this issue, the Board will be better positioned to evaluate the risks, costs, and opportunities for industry participation in proper plugging and abandonment.

This report will provide essential context to ensure that future policy decisions address not only the cessation of oil and gas operations, but also the legacy environmental liabilities left behind.

Background:

Santa Barbara County has historically hosted extensive oil and gas operations, and thousands of wells remain as legacy infrastructure. According to CalGEM, the County currently has approximately 1,318 idle wells and nearly 2,500 already plugged and abandoned. Many additional wells are at risk of becoming orphaned if operators cease operations without proper closure. State law, particularly AB 3233, now requires operators to plug and abandon wells if local jurisdictions restrict operations, but enforcement challenges and operator insolvency may leave taxpayers exposed to substantial cleanup costs.

The May 13, 2025 Board direction focused primarily on restricting new and existing oil production. However, it is equally important to address the environmental and financial liabilities posed by idle and orphaned wells. Recent examples, such as the State's multi-year effort to remediate over 200 orphaned Greka wells, underscore the complexity and cost of such efforts.

By requesting a detailed status report, the Fourth District seeks to ensure that the Board has the necessary information to evaluate the risks associated with orphaned and idle wells, along with potential strategies for collaboration with the oil and gas industry to accelerate abandonment. Addressing this issue responsibly will reduce environmental hazards, protect groundwater and communities, and safeguard County taxpayers from unnecessary financial burdens.

Fiscal and Facilities Impacts:

None

Attachments:

a. Oil fields and wells map: Presented by Supervisor Nelson

Authored by:

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Supervisor Bob Nelson, Fourth District

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