

# **Report of oil & gas well abandonment and reclamation on federal lands administered by BLM-Utah**

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## ***Plugging and reclamation of non-producing energy wells***

The reasons to return non-productive well sites and other associated energy land disturbance activities to near natural surface conditions are numerous, and implicate both environmental and multiple use concerns. Plugging prevents potential spills, soil and water contamination, and the release of volatile hydrocarbons. Reclamation prevents invasive weeds and fugitive dust, provides new forage for wildlife and livestock, reduces soil erosion, and allows for a more scenic setting for humans. Air and water quality are improved, erosion is reduced, wildlife have forage and cover, livestock have more forage, radiant energy is not released to the atmosphere, and carbon sequestering is greater.

By regulation (43 CFR 3162.3-4 Well Abandonment, Onshore Order and APD approval) the lease owner and well operator know that once the well is no longer producing in paying quantities that the well and its related infrastructure is to be plugged, facilities and equipment removed, disturbed sites re-contoured, stored top soil administered to the area and the site re-vegetated to near natural vegetation. The Bureau deliberately instructs its employees (IM No. 2012 -181) to conduct an idle-well review and data entry into the Automated Fluid Minerals Support System to document wells past 7 years of non-production. This effort to professionally abandon wells is required by regulation, improves multiple resource values, services the public responsibly and is professional.

While working at the BLM Vernal Field Office I, along with other BLM employees, developed concern over the lack of priority placed on the plugging of non-producing energy wells and upon conducting appropriate and final reclamation. From 1992 through 2012 at the BLM-Vernal Field Office (VFO) a number of wells were idle in

1992 and these same wells were still not producing in 2012. VFO management was not requiring the operator to plug and reclaim these non-productive locations with the appropriate interest to serve the American public. VFO management focused heavily on land use permitting, specifically energy development to include the permitting of oil & gas wells through their Application for Permit to Drill (APD) process. A large effort; which included considerable time, energy, and expense was conducted in inspecting and documenting idle wells for the appropriate plugging, facility removal, and reclamation of disturbed areas. However this effort was wasted, due to the lack of importance by office management in providing direction, either by an assessment of penalties, bond confiscation (43 CFR 3401.1 thru 3401.8) or lease cancellation (43 CFR3108.3).

As a result of my concerns, I conducted several FOIA requests to learn more about the numbers of unplugged, un-reclaimed wells in Utah. This report summarizes my findings.

### ***FOIA requests***

This report is a summary of four FOIA requests showing the number of wells as recorded by the Agency's Automated Fluid Mineral Support System (AFMSS). FOIA information was received from the Vernal Field Office (*November 2012*), Moab Field Office (*March 2013*), Price Field Office (*April 2013*) and an inclusive FOIA request from the Utah State Office (*February 2015*). The State Office FOIA request was submitted by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER).

**Scope.** Each request asked generally the same question. What were the number of non-producing oil and gas wells that are within the authority of the land management office that have not produced for more than ten years? The FOIA request sought the well name, lease number, legal location, and company name of all wells that have not produced for more than 10 years and had not been Plugged and abandoned (P&A). The information was to include non-producing wells that are on federal, tribal and other lands; where the land management office has authority for these nonproducing wells and responsibility for monitoring and compliance in relation to plugging, abandonment, and

final reclamation oversight. The 10 years of non-production was an arbitrary time; however by experience a more than reasonable time.<sup>1</sup>

**Process of obtaining records.** Each office should have been able to prepare the report through AFMSS in a matter of hours, print out in less than 100 pages, and organize the data for easy analysis and without charge. The offices, however, demonstrated varying degrees of cooperation. For example, the State Office responded to PEER's FOIA request in three months with poor and inadequate information and it took four more months for the office to provide improved data. The Office then sent 6 separate documents requiring time-consuming calculations to interpret the data.

Additionally, in each request the Bureau staff member conducting the query provided somewhat different information and documents required interpretation by the requester. In the Vernal FOIA the column for last production date was titled: *Idle Since*; Moab it was *Status Date*, Price was *Last Produced Date* and the State Office it was *Effective Date*. It can only be assumed each office was using a different column title for the same last production date (?).<sup>2</sup>

### ***Findings***

The following report is my calculations of idle well numbers from each of the FOIA requests. This report assumes that all wells, classified as Gas Shut-In (GSI), Oil Shut-In (OSI), Water Injection well Shut-In (WIWSI), Temporary Abandoned (TA) and Abandoned (ABD), in a reasonable period of time in non-paying quantities should be

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<sup>1</sup> It is known that energy operators do at times place a well into a non-production status for short periods of time for multiple reasons. These reasons can be technical, energy field management, or energy prices. However there are procedures for Temporary Abandonment and Shut-In wells and by design are to be short term. After five years of not producing, especially during periods of high-energy prices the operator should begin to consider and initiate legal and responsible plug and abandonment procedures. The Bureau through its own Instruction Memorandum (IM No. 2012 -181) identifies 7 years of non-production for action by the land management office to assure that idle wells are having oversight to assure abandonment and reclamation and to actively inspect and document the need for plugging and abandonment. A 10-year period of non-production should be more than reasonable for the energy operator to initiate and complete plugging and reclamation of idle wells.

<sup>2</sup> In another irregularity, the Vernal Office charged \$433.46 for the November 2012 FOIA then revised that amount to \$72.00 after a formal objection. The Moab Office requested no charge. The Price Office charged \$105.00, and the last FOIA to the Utah State Office by PEER was not charged. This difference in billing demonstrates a lack of consistency in applying FOIA's mandates regarding fees.

considered for plugging and reclamation. A well is considered with complete final abandonment after a Final Abandonment Notice (FAN) is approved and the well is then listed as Plugged & Abandoned (P&A) in AFMSS.

Using an estimate four acres for each well site and its related infrastructure, I calculated that, based on the 2013 FOIA response from the three Field Offices, there were an estimated **2,888 acres** of un-reclaimed land in Utah for wells more than 10 years in non-production at that time.<sup>3</sup> Based on the 2015 FOIA response from the Utah State Office, there are currently an estimated **2,228 acres** of un-reclaimed land in Utah for wells more than 10 years in non-production.

**Vernal Field Office data 11/20/2012:**

*Note:* The Vernal Field Office reported 355 wells without production for 10 or more years (7/26/65 – 9/19/02)

BLM – 239 wells  
USFS – 3 wells  
FEE – 13 wells  
BIA – 99 wells  
State – 1 well

**Un-reclaimed public lands for Vernal Field Office (2012): ~ 1420 acres.**

**Moab Field Office data 3/18/13:**

*Note:* The Moab Field Office provided only federal wells; the number of other land management agency wells overseen by BLM is not known.

TA – 69 (9/4/65 – 11/10/99)  
GSI/OSI – 64 (3/22/61 – 9/1/02)  
ABD – 171 (no status date?)

**Un-reclaimed public lands for Moab Field Office (2013): ~ 1216 acres.**

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<sup>3</sup> Note: The Salt Lake Office was not FOIA'd at that time.

**Price Field Office data 4/9/13:**

*Note:* The Price Field Office provided only federal wells; the number of other land management agency wells overseen by BLM is not known.

TA, GSI, DSI, OSI – 16 wells (7/27/53 – 11/6/01)

ABD – 47 wells (no last produced date?)

**Un-reclaimed public lands for Price Field Office (2013): ~ 252 acres.**

**Utah State Office data 2/27/15:**

*All data received:*

GSI/TA/OSI/Orphan/DSI; 250 – wells (7/27/53 – 10/01/13)

ABD; 1,067 - wells (4/30/79 – 1/15/15)

Moab 300 wells

Price 69 wells

Salt Lake 36 wells

Vernal 912 wells

*Only well data 7 years and older:*

769 wells

Moab 200 wells

Price 34 wells

Salt Lake 25 wells

Vernal 520 wells

*Only well data 10 years and older:*

557 wells

Moab 162 wells

Price 29 wells

Salt Lake 23 wells

Vernal 334 wells

**Un-reclaimed public lands in Utah (2015): ~ 2228 acres.**

***Conclusion***

In sum, it is clear that there are thousands of acres of un-reclaimed public land in Utah, despite BLM's obligation to ensure the plugging and reclamation of oil and gas

wells that have not been producing in paying quantities for ten years. Professional land managers are obligated to fulfill the public trust responsibility not only to authorize land use and development for energy related resources but also naturalizing the public lands for the citizens post energy use. This is part of the mission of the Bureau by definition ... *to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of public land for present and future generations.*