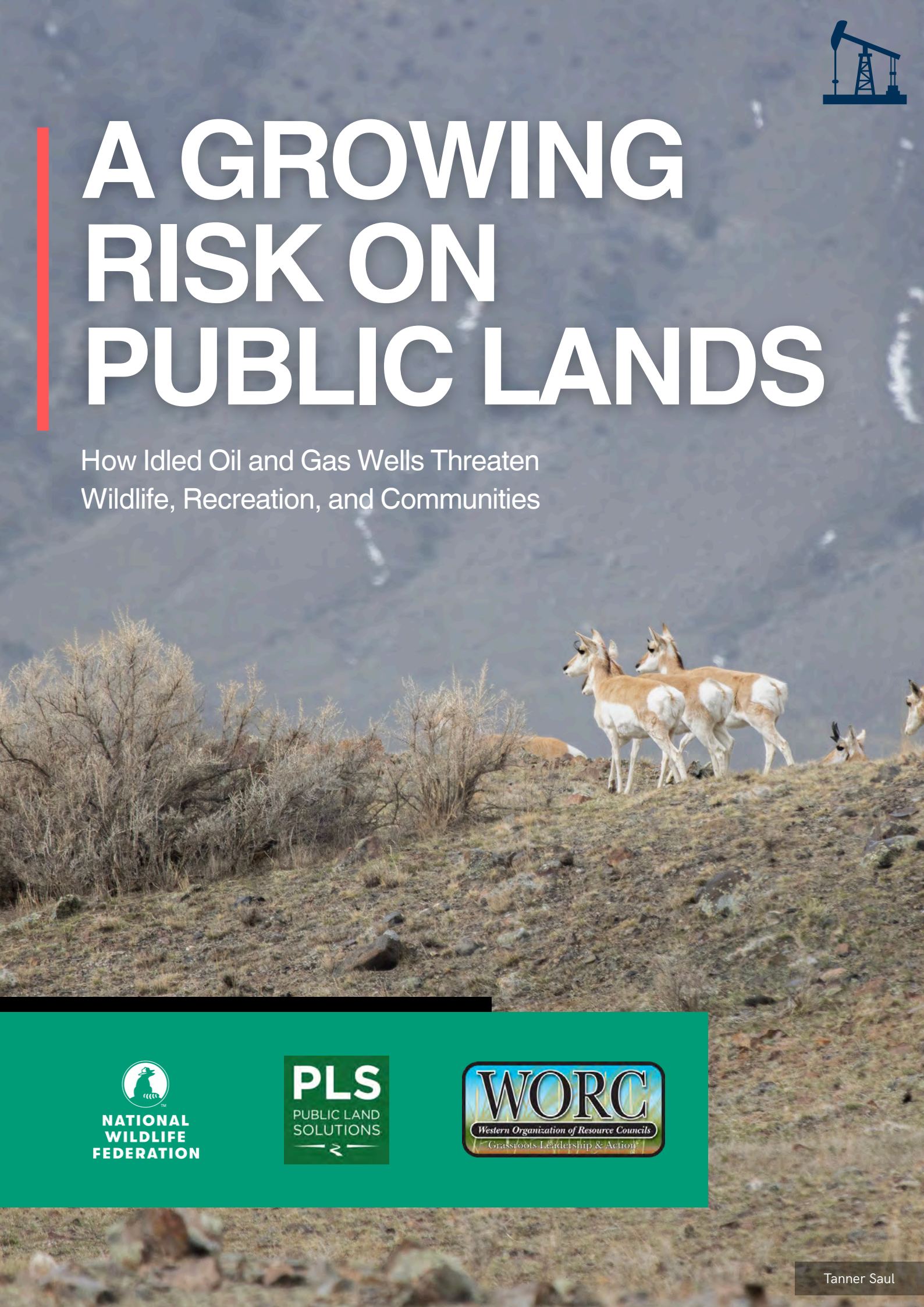
A GROWING RISK ON PUBLIC LANDS

How Idled Oil and Gas Wells Threaten Wildlife, Recreation, and Communities



NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

PLS PUBLIC LAND SOLUTIONS

WORC Western Organization of Resource Councils Grassroots Leadership & Action

Tanner Saul

INTRODUCTION

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Orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells have long-plagued our national public lands. These wells pose a serious and ongoing threat to air, water, wildlife habitat, recreation resources, and communities by leaking methane gas, contaminating surface water and groundwater, fragmenting habitats, eroding soil, and interfering with agricultural and recreational land use.[1] Abandoned wells are wells that are no longer being used for producing oil or gas and either are no longer being maintained or have not been plugged and reclaimed. Orphaned wells are a subset of abandoned wells that have no identifiable operator that can be held responsible for cleaning them up. Due to the boom and bust nature of the oil and gas industry, bankruptcy is one common cause of abandoned wells becoming orphaned.[2]

> The number of documented orphaned wells in the United States has more than doubled since 2020,[3] and still there are hundreds of thousands—and potentially millions—more undocumented orphaned wells across the country.[4]
>
> Interstate Oil & Gas Compact Commission (IOGCC)

Many of these wells are located in the West, where most federal lands are located. However, due to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) having historically failed to systematically track how many wells become orphaned on public and split-estate lands over specific time frames, only rough estimates exist for the number of orphaned wells on federal lands.

The Interior Department's most recent inventory identified nearly 16,000 orphaned wells on federal lands and mineral estate,[5] and there are very likely thousands more out there threatening the places that many Americans call home, depend on for their livelihood, or treasure for outdoor activities like hunting, fishing, and hiking.

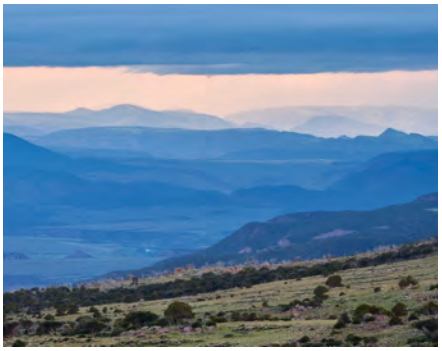
In fact, even before wells become officially known as being orphaned or abandoned, "idled" wells can pose health and safety risks to public lands, waters, wildlife and communities, as well as financial risks to American taxpayers. On federal land and mineral estate, an idled well is defined as a well that has not been in operation for at least four years and for which there is no anticipated beneficial future use.[6] These wells are at significant risk of becoming orphaned, and some almost certainly already are but have just not yet been identified as "orphaned."[7] As the Government Accountability Office has found, the risk of wells becoming orphaned increases the longer they are not in production.[8]

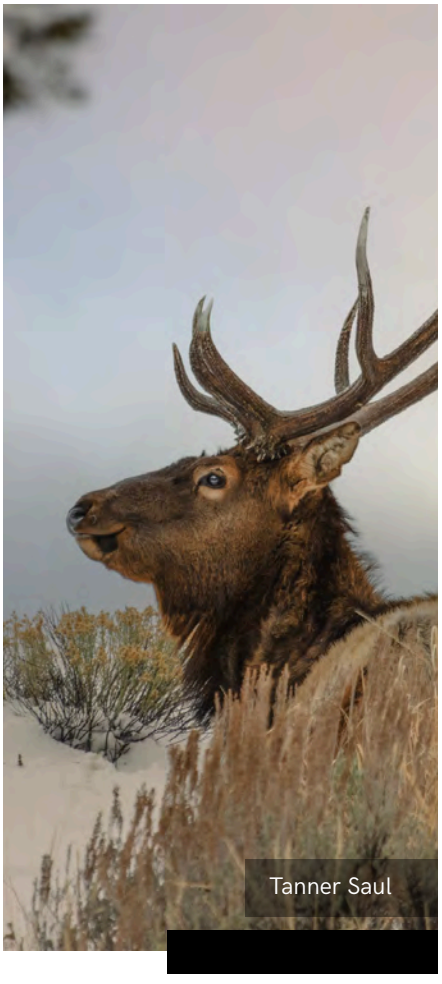
Western Organization of Resource Council

As of September 5, 2025, there are currently 7,702 idled wells on public and split-estate lands across the country.[9] Many of these wells are located in crucial wildlife habitat or near recreation hotspots, where drilling should have never occurred in the first place.

Others have been left beneath surface lands that are privately owned, where farmers, ranchers, Tribal members, and other community residents have already been dealing with the far-reaching implications of oil and gas development on their property. Yet now these wells have languished on the public and split-estate lands that are invaluable to the Western way of life for at least the past four years, and they are at high risk of soon becoming orphaned—and some may already be abandoned. Every day that passes, the probability goes up that these wells could be left unplugged without any responsible party to clean them up.

In this report, we highlight five case studies showing where idled wells are **currently threatening wildlife habitat**, **recreation resources, and communities across the West**. These places are known for their prime hunting, cultural significance, exceptional bike trails, scenic wildlife viewing, agricultural viability, and spectacular float trips—and yet the idled wells that surround these special places pose a serious threat to all that they have to offer. If these nonproducing wells are left unplugged, the American public could be forced to put up the money necessary for cleaning them up to ensure that they aren't left to continue to harm our public lands, waters, wildlife, and communities for years to come.





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COLORADO

Total Number of Idled Wells as of 9/05/25	243
Idled Wells in Big Game Winter Habitat	166
Idled Wells in Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat	31, including 19 in priority habitat
Idled Wells under Private Surface Lands	43
Idled Wells Near Hunting and Recreation Areas	53

Moffat County Case Study

In far northwestern Colorado sits a land of endless vistas, abundant wildlife, and extreme solitude. In Moffat County, a scant 14,000 residents occupy a high desert landscape three times the size of Rhode Island, where there are quite possibly more elk than humans. Home to more than 2 million acres of public lands, Moffat County offers plenty of room to roam and countless outdoor recreation opportunities such as hunting, fishing, camping, rafting, and off-roading. From the famous Sand Wash Basin and Cold Spring Mountain to national monuments and wildlife refuges, Moffat County is a haven for outdoors enthusiasts.

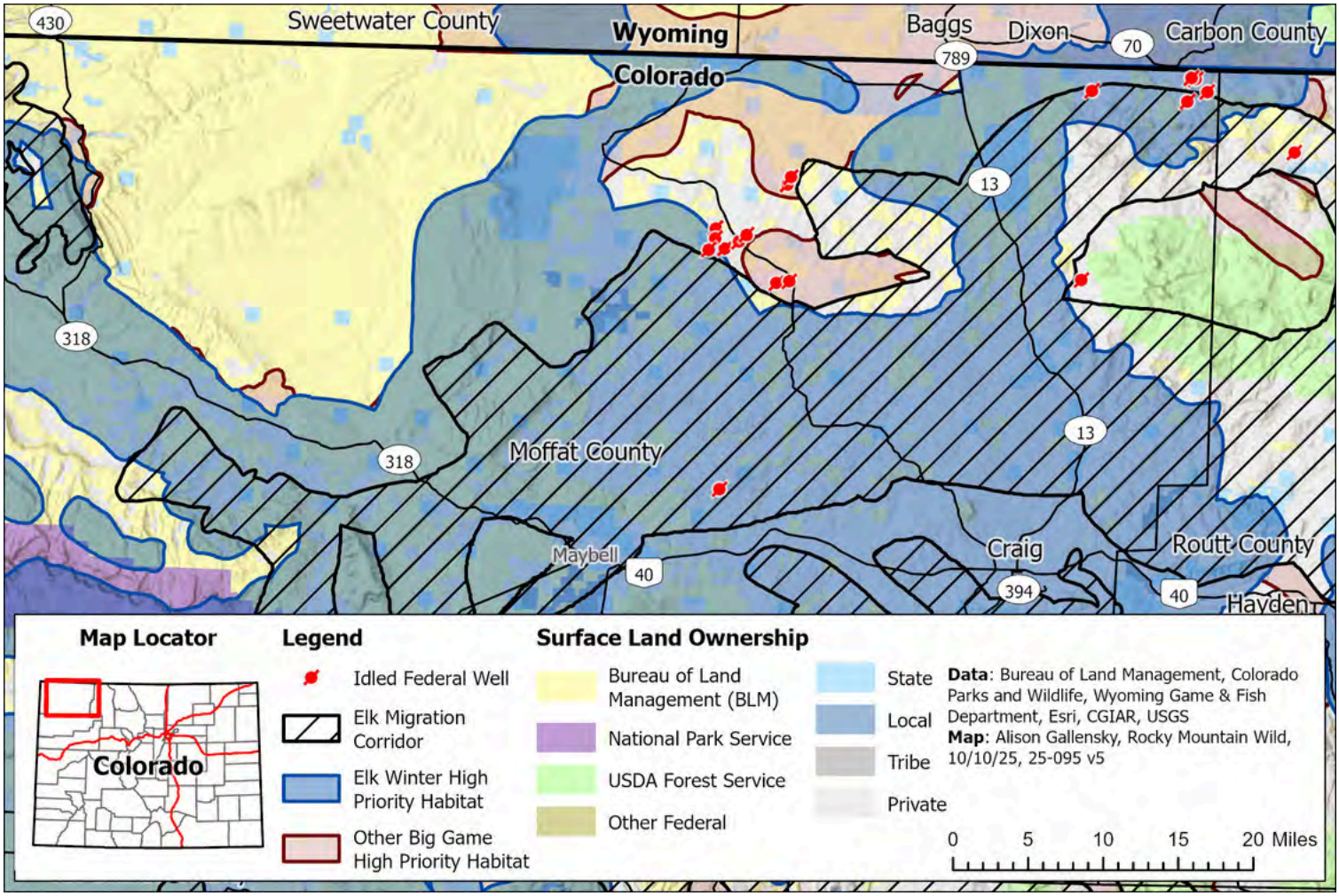
Big game hunting is a cultural and economic force in the county, drawing visitors from across the globe. Moffat County is home to two of the largest migratory elk herds on the entire planet, and is described as the "elk hunting capital of the world." Tags for the hunting units that lie in Moffat County are some of the most coveted tags in the entire world. Fishing in area streams is also highly valued while Brown's Park National Wildlife Refuge offers the chance at seeing moose, beaver, bears, and dozens of important bird species or to camp under some of the darkest night skies in the U.S.

Aaron Kindle

Visitors and residents alike know very well that Moffat County, Colorado is a special place. Responsibly managing energy development is paramount to ensuring a prosperous future for the people and wildlife of Moffat County, yet unfortunately there are numerous idled wells scattered across the county's national public lands. These wells are at high risk of becoming orphaned, threatening both wildlife health and human health and posing significant impacts to Moffat County's spectacular outdoor recreation resources and its rural economy. Taxpayers cannot be left on the hook to save the Northwest Colorado landscape from the looming threat of abandoned well sites and decaying infrastructure. Oil and gas companies leasing the national public lands that belong to all of us must be held responsible for cleaning up the wells they drill in this special place.

Jon Mullen

Moffat County, Colorado



Idled federal wells in and surrounding high priority habitat for elk and other ungulate species in Moffat County, Colorado.

MONTANA

Total Number of Idled Wells as of 9/05/25	338
Idled Wells in Big Game Winter Habitat	155
Idled Wells overlapping Big Game Migration Corridors	59, including 6 in priority habitat
Idled Wells in Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat	115
Idled Wells under Private Surface Lands	137
Idled Wells Near Hunting and Recreation Areas	49

Alec Underwood

Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument Case Study

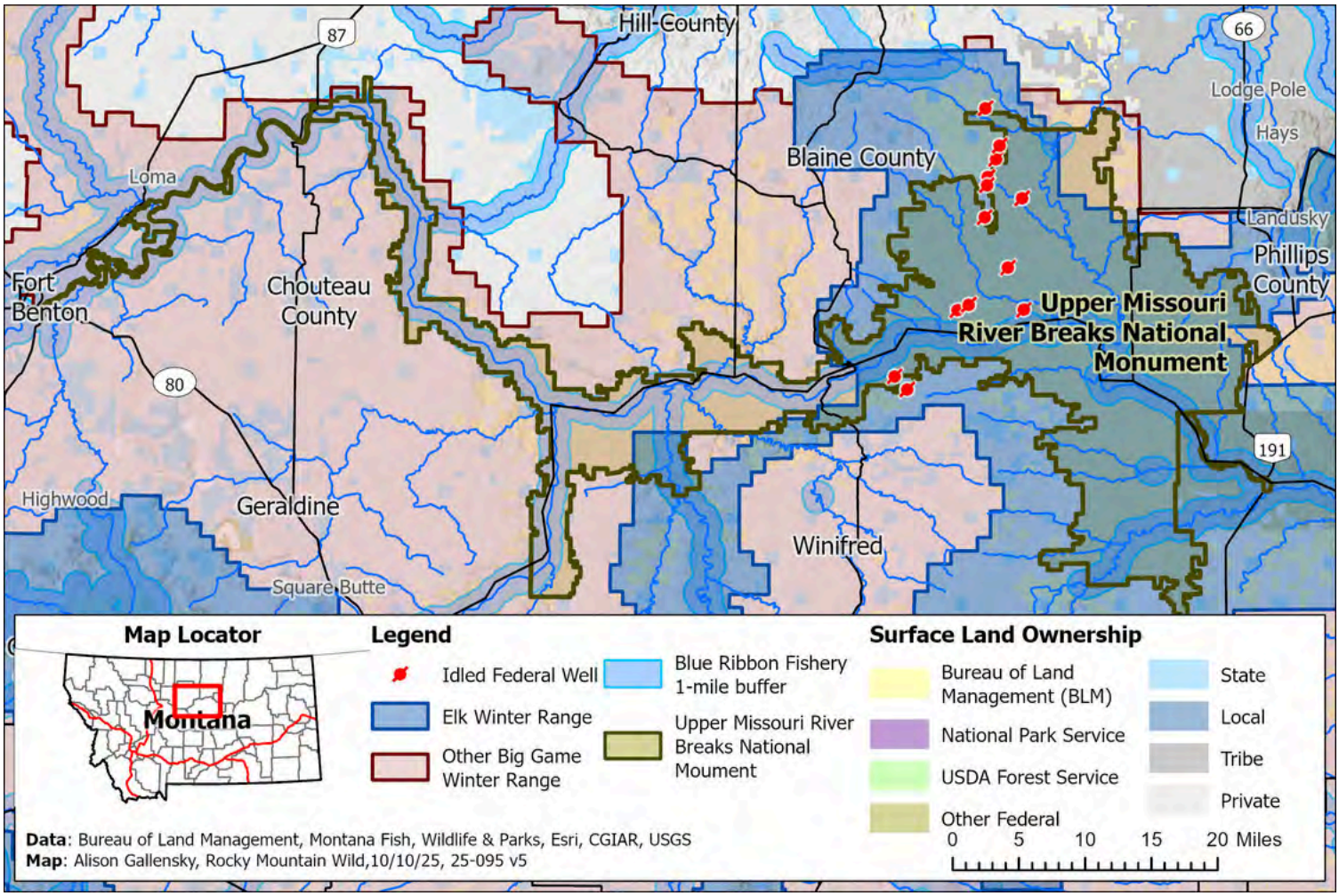
There's nowhere quite like the Missouri River Breaks. Here, the flat plains of Montana drop suddenly into a maze of cliffs, canyons, and rolling badlands—a wild, rugged country that feels untouched by time. The Breaks cover more than 377,000 acres within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument and are surrounded by another 1.1 million acres of public land in the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. Every year, around 30,000 people come to visit the Missouri Breaks as well as float the same river Lewis and Clark once traveled, to explore old homesteads perched above the water, and to see the ancient tipi rings and petroglyphs left by Native peoples who have lived in the region for thousands of years. It's a place where history and wilderness meet in the most breathtaking way.

This landscape is alive with wildlife—more than sixty species of mammals roam its canyons, prairies, and river bottoms. Some of the biggest bull elk in Montana call this country home, and drawing a hunting tag here is like holding a ticket to one of North America's most coveted public land hunts. Mule deer and pronghorn move through the sagebrush flats, and whitetail deer thrive in the cottonwood bottoms along the river. Beneath the surface of the Missouri River, paddlefish and sturgeon—species that have survived since the age of the dinosaurs—still swim.

The Missouri River Breaks are clearly too special to drill, and yet the public lands that host a spectacular array of wildlife, unique geological features, endless recreational opportunities, and significant historical and cultural values are also now dotted with idled oil and gas wells. The region is defined by its abundance of fauna, flora, history and solitude, all of which are at risk if the wells that have been left unplugged and out of production for years become orphaned. The Missouri River Breaks deserve to remain what they have always been: a sanctuary for wildlife, a paradise for hunters and anglers, and a testament to the enduring power of wild country. The companies that drilled the wells that now threaten this wondrous landscape must be held accountable for cleaning them up.

Alec Underwood

Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, Montana



Idled federal wells in and surrounding Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in central Montana.

NEW MEXICO

Total Number of Idled Wells as of 9/05/25	555
Idled Wells in Big Game Winter Habitat	142
Idled Wells under Private Surface Lands	124
Idled Wells Near Hunting and Recreation Areas	48

Northwest New Mexico Case Study

Looking to the future, Northwest New Mexico is working hard to diversify its economy by investing in outdoor recreation. In Farmington, the Outdoor Recreation Industry Initiative and Four Corners Economic Development promote trails, river access, and desert adventure to attract visitors and support local jobs. Every year, outdoor visitors of all types are drawn to the beauty of the San Juan River corridor and areas like the Glade Run Recreation Area, which offers over 19,000 acres of sandy arroyos, slick rock, and rolling terrain for motorized trail bike and mountain bike riders to enjoy.

Unfortunately, Northwest New Mexico's legacy of oil and gas development has left dozens of idled federal wells scattered across its public lands, carrying with them environmental impacts that could conflict with the area's efforts to market clean, scenic landscapes and reliable outdoor access. While visitors to the region look forward to immersing themselves in intact scenery as they paddle the San Juan River or explore Farmington's extensive network of OHV trails, idled wells in the area threaten to degrade the very experience recreationists seek. If these sites continue to be left abandoned and unreclaimed, rusting wellheads, tanks, and eroded access roads will scar the wild slickrock and desert benches that are the hallmark of this special landscape. Meanwhile, industrial remnants surrounding the nearby Navajo Lake State Park threaten to degrade shorelines, leak methane, and risk water contamination, to the detriment of the unique boating, fishing, and camping experiences the park offers.

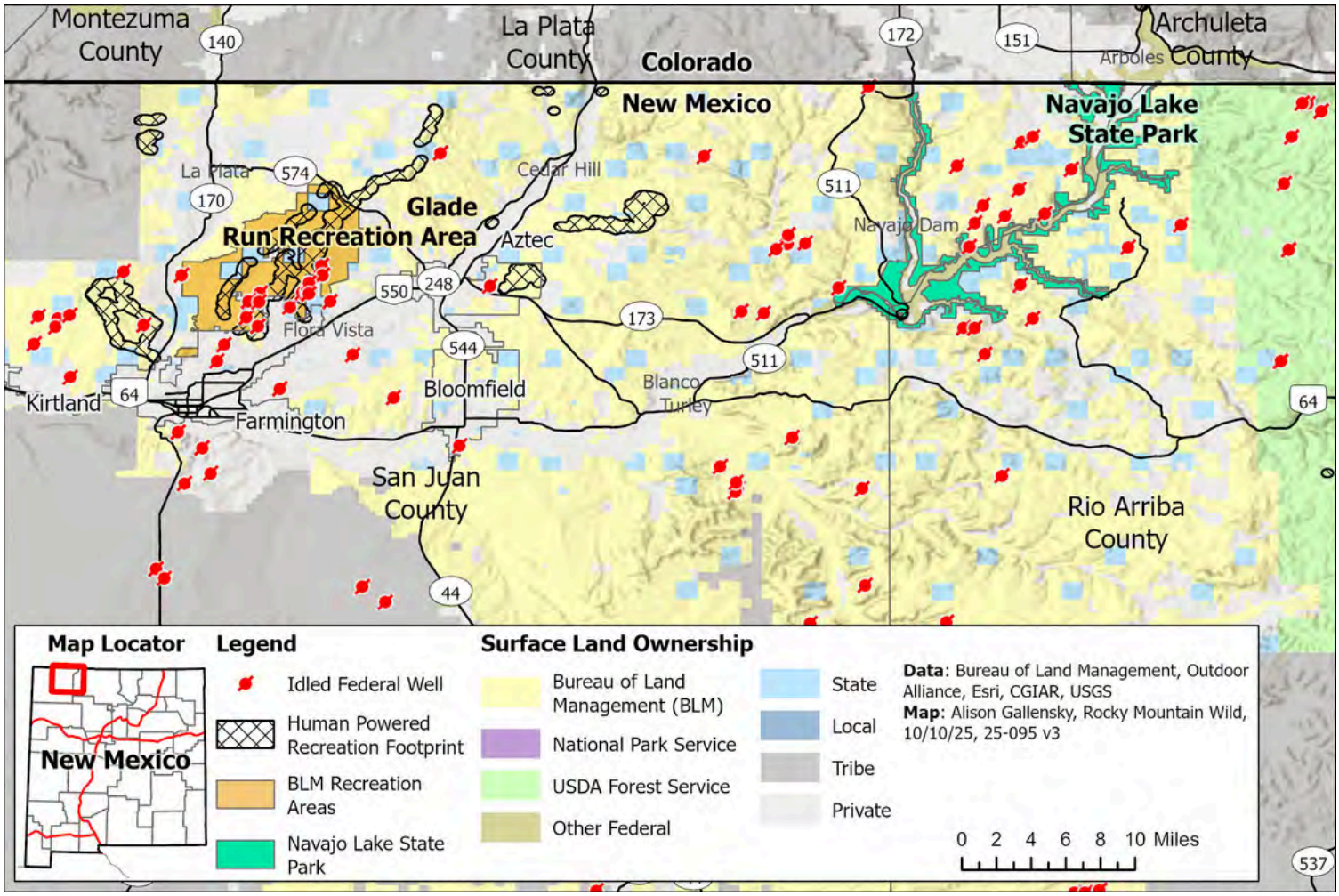
Bureau of Land Management

These hazards have the potential to seriously weaken Northwest New Mexico's outdoor economy by eroding visitor confidence, damaging the reputation of outfitters and guides, reducing stays and spending, and forcing park managers to divert resources from recreation improvements. These impacts would then ripple through the local economy, as even small declines in visitation to the region could hurt hotels, restaurants, shuttle services, and guide companies in Farmington and surrounding towns.

Holding the operators of the idled wells near this high-value recreation zone responsible for rapidly plugging and reclaiming their sites is essential for protecting water quality, restoring scenery, and reinforcing the region's outdoor brand. These companies must be made to clean up after themselves so that Farmington and San Juan County can secure their future as an outdoor recreation hub.

Bureau of Land Management

Northwest New Mexico



Idled federal wells in and surrounding the Glade Run Recreation Area and Navajo Lake State Park in northwestern New Mexico.

UTAH

Total Number of Idled Wells as of 9/05/25	835
Idled Wells in Big Game Winter Habitat	745
Idled Wells overlapping Big Game Migration Corridors	76
Idled Wells in Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat	50
Idled Wells under Private Surface Lands	13
Idled Wells Near Hunting and Recreation Areas	112

Southeast Utah Case Study

Outdoor recreation is a cornerstone of San Juan County's economy. Tourists come to float, fish, hike, explore, and bask in the scenic beauty and solitude of the unspoiled river landscape. Mexican Hat, a small town situated right on the San Juan River, offers a unique feeling of remoteness and a "wild" brand that keeps it competitive with other nearby outdoor recreation hubs. Year-round, river runners can float 27 miles from Sand Island to Mexican Hat or 57 miles from Mexican Hat to Clay Hills, through stunning redrock canyons and Ancestral Puebloan rock art and ruins. These sections of the San Juan River are known for offering some of the most family-friendly floats in Utah.

The BLM itself boasts the San Juan River as "a spectacular waterway where many values of the BLM—maintaining wildlife habitat, preserving cultural resources, and providing world-class recreation experiences—intersect." Visitors come to southeast Utah to enjoy all of these things, and towns like Mexican Hat and the adjacent Bluff and Blanding rely on visitation to support lodging, outfitters, restaurants, and guides.

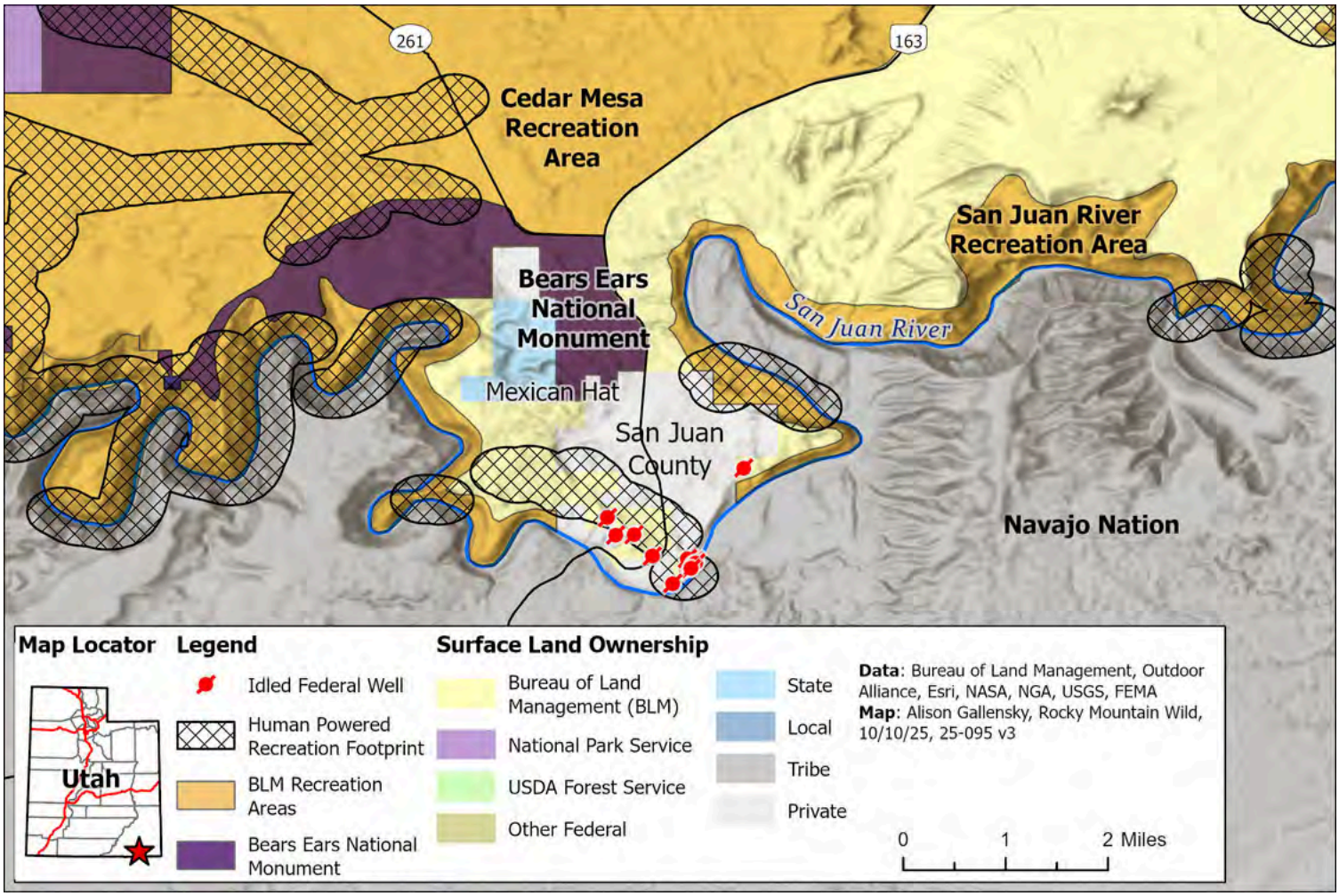
Bureau of Land Management

Unfortunately, the region is currently threatened by idled federal oil and gas wells, several of which are located on public lands abutting the boat ramp at Mexican Hat where visitors begin their floats down the San Juan. River runners expect a pristine river corridor, but now they may find themselves passing abandoned wellheads, pads, service roads, and pipelines that fragment the ecosystem and scar the view. And these unreclaimed well sites are not just an eyesore—they also can leak methane or other pollutants and pose significant safety hazards, ultimately demanding for taxpayer-funded agency budgets to be put toward their cleanup instead of the improvement of campsites, boat ramps, and trailheads that visitors use before or after their river trips.

Southeast Utah is a beloved outdoor recreation destination, and the San Juan River anchors the towns of Mexican Hat and Bluff's small economies. The river also serves as a vital water source for communities and agriculture in the region and holds significant cultural and historical importance to Tribes. Idled oil and gas wells in the area threaten San Juan County's present and future. Requiring the companies that drill wells in this landscape to pay to clean them up afterwards is critical for ensuring the wells do not end up spoiling Southeast Utah's outdoor heritage for years to come.

Matthew Dillon

Southeast Utah



Idled federal wells directly adjacent to the boat ramp at Mexican Hat, along the San Juan River in southeastern Utah.

WYOMING

Total Number of Idled Wells as of 9/05/25	4,001
Idled Wells in Big Game Winter Habitat	408
Idled Wells overlapping Big Game Migration Corridors	56
Idled Wells in Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat	3,954, including 155 in priority habitat
Idled Wells under Private Surface Lands	1,894
Idled Wells Near Hunting and Recreation Areas	1,709

Powder River Basin Case Study

The Powder River Basin, located in the northeastern corner of Wyoming, hosts a unique array of land, mineral, water, and clean air resources that together support the region's agricultural heritage and rural lifestyle. Three quarters of the surface lands in the Powder River Basin are privately owned, and the federal government owns approximately 63% of the mineral rights under the surface. This means that it is often the case that the BLM manages the mineral estate underlying landowners' private property, including for oil and gas leasing and development.

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In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a natural gas boom left landowners in the Powder River Basin powerless against the companies holding federal leases in the area that had dominance over the surface estate and drilled about 24,000 coalbed methane wells. When the gas boom petered out, these landowners were then left with huge numbers of wells on their properties that had been left behind by the companies that drilled them.

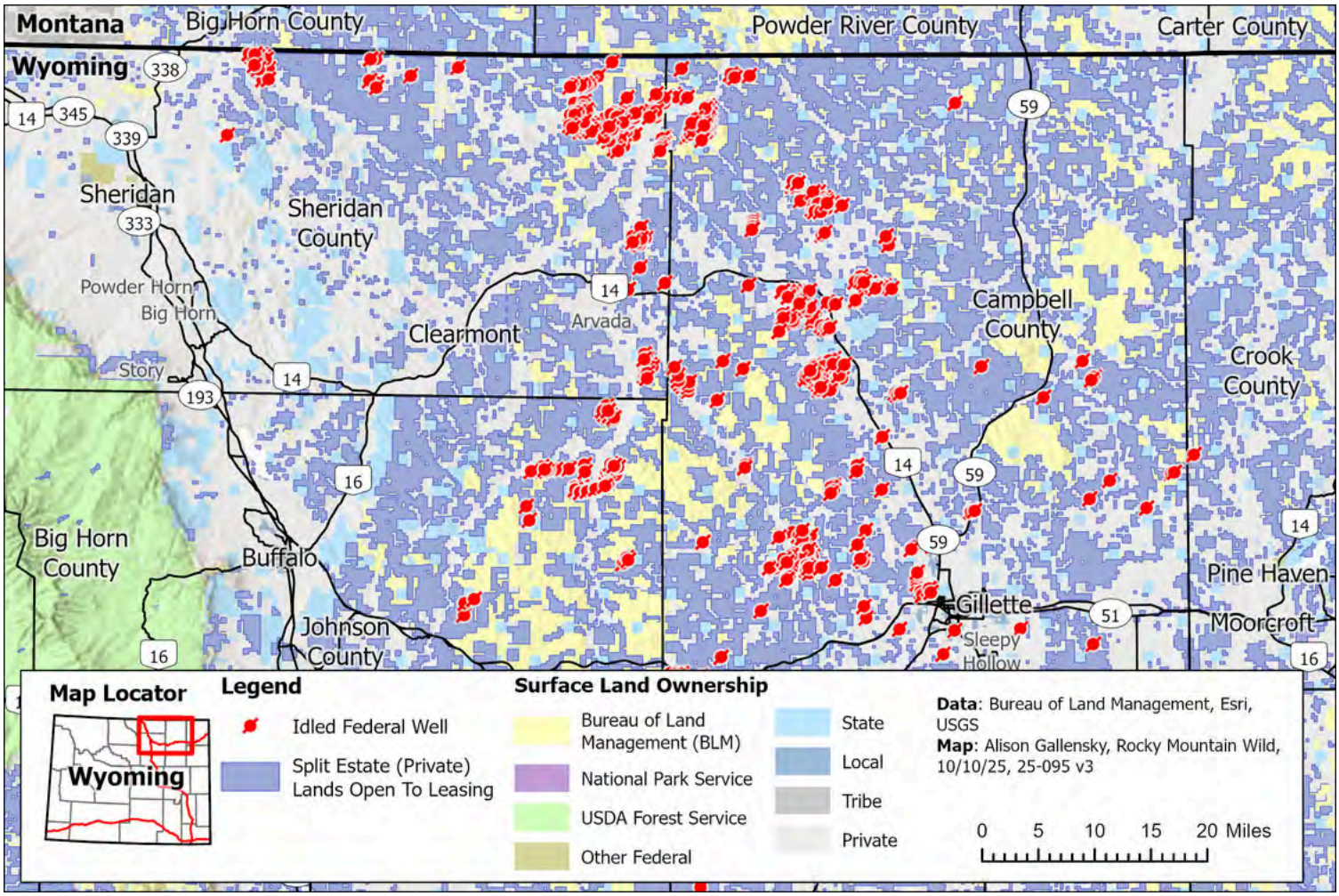
Since production in the Powder River Basin dropped off, the Wyoming Oil and Gas Conservation Commission (WOGCC) has documented 6,020 orphaned wells on private and state lands. WOGCC has been making fairly steady progress plugging and reclaiming these sites, tapping reclamation bonds posted by oil and gas companies as well as funds generated by a fee on oil and gas production.

But the BLM's approach for federal sites has been much slower—and ranchers and other landowners in the Powder River Basin are paying a heavy price for the delay. The BLM's failure to historically address idled wells for long periods of time not only infringes on the use and enjoyment of land, but also is expensive—especially when it impedes ranching operations—and can be dangerous. In addition to the wells themselves, these sites often include leaking tanks and pipelines, unremediated spills and damage from produced water, damaged fencing, noxious weeds, erosion, and other hazards that pose risks to cattle, wildlife and people, and impede farming and ranching operations.

With over 4,000 idled federal wells, Wyoming stands out as having more than all other states combined—and many of these wells are very likely orphaned. The mass idling and orphaning of coalbed methane wells on split-estate lands in the Powder River Basin serves as a particularly cautionary tale for federal land managers and all who rely on and enjoy public lands. Historically inadequate federal bonding rates are at the root of this problem, and the only way to prevent it from getting any bigger is to ensure the companies that are allowed to drill underneath private property are first putting down bonds sufficient for covering their cleanup costs afterwards.

Tanner Saul

Powder River Basin, Wyoming



Idled federal wells on split-estate lands in the Powder River Basin of northeastern Wyoming.

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CONCLUSION

In 2024, the BLM took significant steps to reduce idled wells on national public lands. In recognition of the threat that idled wells pose to escalating the current orphaned well crisis, the Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Rule directed improved identification, tracking, and proactive management of idled wells. The Rule also went a step further and made long-overdue changes to address the root cause of oil companies being able to abandon their wells on public lands without cleaning them up and to then stick taxpayers with the bill.[10] By modestly increasing federal bonding requirements for the first time in more than sixty years, the BLM took important action to protect our public lands and the multitude of conservation and recreation resources they offer from becoming further threatened by orphaned and abandoned wells.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration's recent decision[11] to roll back these reforms means that the wells highlighted in this report represent only a fraction of the wells that will become idled and quite possibly orphaned and abandoned in the future. As oil companies expand their operations across the more than 200 million acres of national public lands that are currently open to leasing,[12] it will be only a matter of time until the oil and gas boom-and-bust cycle leads to companies leaving behind the huge numbers of wells they drilled without cleaning them up. At that point, it will be left to taxpayers to front the astronomical multi-billion-dollar bill to ensure that unplugged wells and abandoned infrastructure aren't left to degrade the treasured wildlife habitat areas, recreation hotspots, and private properties that are the cornerstone of the Western way of life.

Tanner Saul

Threats To Tribal Lands From Abandoned & Idled Wells

It is not possible to discuss the threat of orphaned, abandoned, and idled wells on national public lands without acknowledging that Tribal lands are also plagued by significant environmental and health impacts from unplugged wells and unreclaimed drilling sites. The Department of Interior assists Tribal governments and individual allottees in managing, protecting and developing 60 million acres of mineral resources across the U.S. While oil and gas leasing is coordinated by the Indian Energy Service Center at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, some of the Bureau of Land Management's rules apply to Tribal minerals as well as federal. As a result, Tribal lands have also been burdened by the BLM's legacy of weak rules for managing nonoperational wells and enforcement.

In North Dakota, for example, over 3,000 oil wells have been drilled on the lands of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikra (MHA) Nation since 2006, producing over a billion tons of oil over two decades. There are a growing number of idled and orphaned wells on MHA Nation lands, although the exact number is unknown because there is little public information about idled and orphaned wells on Tribal lands. Nonetheless, these wells have been exacerbating health problems among members of the MHA Nation for decades, evident through the air monitoring systems that many members have been led to install within their communities to track the air pollution as federal regulations and protections have repeatedly fallen short.

In addition, Tribal members only have to look to the south to see the effects of historically weak federal bonding policies on sacred and cultural sites. As documented by Archaeology Southwest, there are two hundred orphaned wells within ten miles of Chaco Culture National Historical Park and Aztec Ruins National Monument, and dozens of wells have been drilled within or in close proximity to the Alkali Ridge National Historic Landmark, Hovenweep National Monument, and several other culturally sensitive areas in southeastern Utah.[13] Although many of these wells have not produced oil or gas in years, they have not been properly plugged or reclaimed. For years, outdated bonding requirements allowed for oil and gas companies to abandon their well sites without cleaning them up, and, as a result, cultural resources and sensitive landscapes have borne the burden of those irresponsible leasing policies.

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Citations

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