

OPINION

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W.Va. must take action on unplugged gas, oil wells

Much as they had to address the residual effect of coal mining on the Mountain State's environment, lawmakers must be willing to find solutions for the more than 4,500 unplugged oil and natural gas wells across the state.

As David McMahon, lobbyist for the West Virginia Surface Owners Rights Organization told NCWV Media's Conor Griffith, these unplugged wells are a "huge problem."

"It's one of the most widespread environmental and personal property issues the state faces," McMahon said.

The unplugged wells have a negative effect on the property's value and its appeal, McMahon said. And they can lead oil and other chemicals into the ground water, adversely impacting the water supply for these areas, many of which are rural in nature.

The elements seeping into the ground water could also destroy seals on septic tanks, releasing bacteria to contaminate the groundwater, as well.

Understand, this isn't an issue of proponents of drilling vs. opponents of extracting natural resources.

"None of our members have said, 'don't drill,'" McMahon said. "There's a lot of money here, enough to do it right."

And therein lies the truth, but also unveils the major issue: Many of these wells are

abandoned, with their previous owners and the drilling companies out of business.

As McMahon and others in the industry have explained, many of these wells date many years, some as many as a century old.

Charlie Burd, the executive director of the Independent Oil and Natural Gas Association of West Virginia, believes that's the case with many of the wells.

And he notes that prior to 1929, there was no modern permitting system and few, if any, regulations.

There are two bills that will address some of the issues, but we question whether they go far enough in providing funding for the backlog of orphaned wells.

The bills place more regulations on companies looking to drill and maintain wells, making them establish a clear funding mechanism to the eventual capping of the well when it is no longer productive. SORO would like to see the state require more bonding

money when companies transfer assets, making sure the buyer knows of the liability of needing to cap unused wells.

We also believe the state needs to address the inadequate funding procedures in place, as McMahon said there are usually only enough funds to cap about 10 abandoned wells per year.

At a cost of an estimated \$25,000-\$60,000 per well, we are talking about a significant investment in the range of \$112.5 million to \$270 million.

Obviously, that won't happen within the year, but the state must begin serious efforts to timely address this matter.

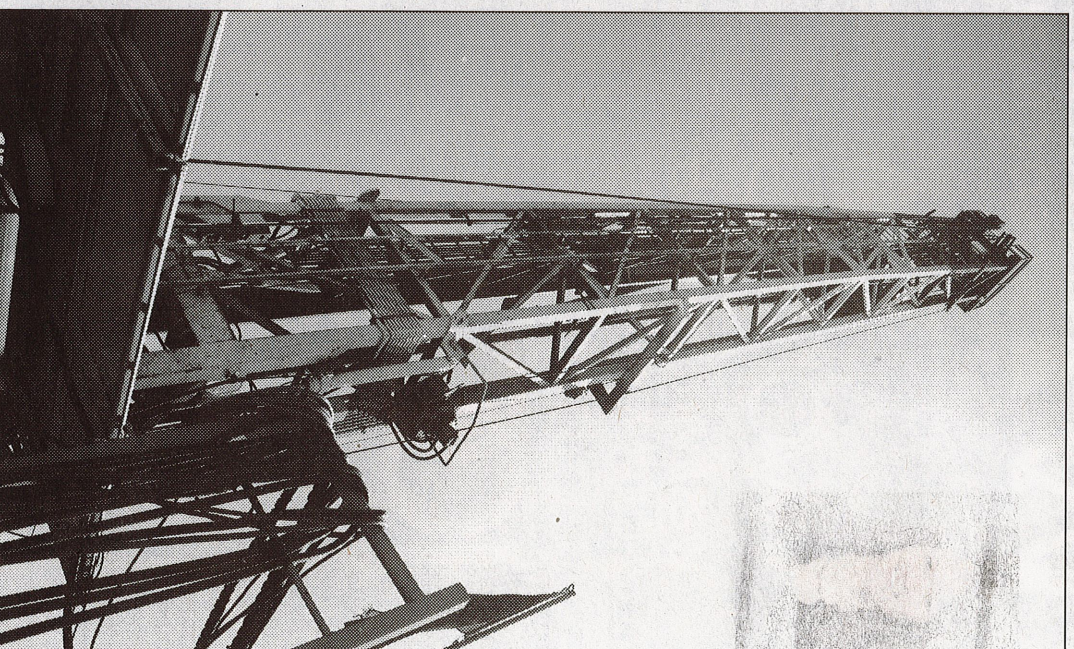
At the current rate of 10 per year, it would take 450 years to complete the task. That is unacceptable when we're talking about environmentally damaging elements potentially entering our groundwater system.

As we've noted in our past support of the natural gas, oil and coal industries, we know of their importance in powering this, the greatest nation in the world. We know West Virginia's role as an energy state.

But we also know McMahon is correct: This is plenty of money to do it right, from drilling the wells, exporting the gas, repairing damaged roads and providing a safeguard to the environment with the practice of tapping dormant wells.

Lawmakers should find a dedicated funding source to make capping abandoned wells a priority, as well as toughening regulations for current and new drillers and well owners.

The goal should be: Do it right — the first time.



File photo

Many oil and gas wells that remain unplugged were not recently built, but are years or even decades old, industry experts have said.