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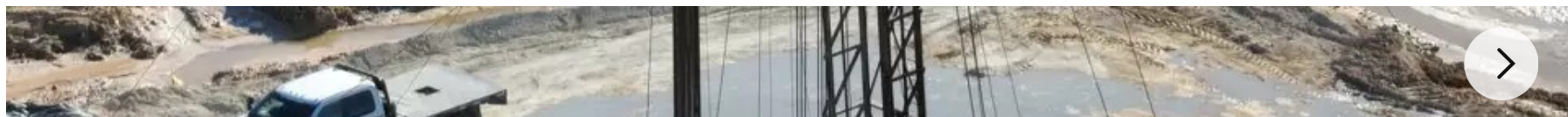
BUSINESS // ENERGY

‘Unusual’ well in West Texas no-fly zone now plugged, Railroad Commission staffer says

By **Amanda Drane**, Staff writer

Jan 30, 2024

 Gift Article





Danny Sorrells, oil and gas director for the Texas Railroad Commission, told commissioners that plugging the well leaking in Crane County well was completed this week.

Sarah Stogner

State crews plugged an “unusual” well at the center of a West Texas no-fly zone on Monday, yet investigation into the still-unidentified well is “ongoing,” according to an update provided Tuesday during a meeting of the Texas Railroad Commission.

Danny Sorrells, oil and gas director for the Texas Railroad Commission, told commissioners that plugging the well was a challenging task that cost the state \$2.5 million and defied industry norms. He said there have been weekly “war room” meetings between commission staff and the Bureau of Economic Geology since the Crane County well erupted Dec. 7.

“It is unusual, has unusual geology and it also has unusual water flows, so we’re looking into that also,” he told commissioners Tuesday. “This is ongoing.”

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The super-salty toxic water that flowed for six weeks contained dangerous levels of the carcinogen benzene and threatened to contaminate protected aquifers. It's the latest sign of trouble under the aging oil fields just north of Fort Stockton, where water under pressure can travel underground — at times carrying radioactive elements, chemicals and other oil field waste — until it finds the path of least resistance to the surface, often an unplugged well, and bursts to the surface.

Sorrells said commission staff was unable to confirm the well ever produced oil, which would have given it clear jurisdiction over the well. Still, he said, intervention was necessary for the sake of

freshwater protection.

“It wasn’t a normal plug job that we were moving on,” Sorrells reported. “This was something that we needed to do for the freshwater in the state of Texas, in my opinion.”

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The Railroad Commission obtained a no-fly zone from the Federal Aviation Administration after at least one critic, Sarah Stogner, flew drones near crews working to stanch the flow. The commission said a drone flew “dangerously close” to crews and equipment. Stogner has denied flying close to crews.

The RRC crews ended up digging 20 pits to contain the massive amounts of brine flowing from the well, Sorrells told the commission. Hauling water away from the site was a 24-7 operation that required two crews, he said.

“It wasn’t easy,” he said. “It wasn’t an easy plug, but we did plug it.”

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After crews initially stopped the flow on Jan. 21, Sorrells said “breakouts” cropped up around the well, including some “quite a distance from the well.” He said they later stopped the breakouts by halting the flow of water into the well’s casing, or the lining of the well.

The well doesn’t exist on any historical maps despite it having production casing, he said.

“We don’t really know why this well was drilled,” he said. “We have no records of it. And we have — I mean, it’s not like we just looked at a couple places. We’ve looked at everything.”

Stogner, who lives on a nearby ranch, said Tuesday after the meeting that she hopes the Railroad Commission is investigating aging wells within a two-mile radius of this mysterious well, noting an earlier blowout two years ago was only 400 yards away. The water in that geyser bears striking resemblance to water that burst to the surface last month, suggesting they may share a common source, a groundwater scientist said last week.

“That pressure and flow has to go somewhere,” Stogner said. “So where is it going now?”

That question also vexes Bill Wight, a cattle rancher who owns the property where the well is.

"I'm glad they got it stopped and I hope it stays stopped," he said Tuesday after the meeting, "but they need to deal with all that pressure."

(Updated Jan. 30 at 4:05 p.m.) *This story has been updated to add comment from the property owner.*

Jan 30, 2024



By **Amanda Drane**



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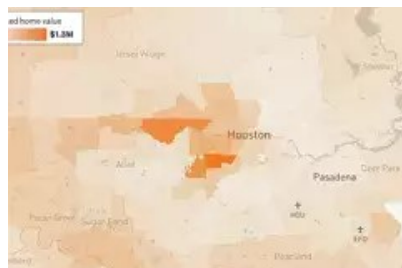
Amanda covers the Texas energy industry and the people affected by it, with a particular focus on oil, gas, chemicals and the transition to cleaner energy. Before joining the paper's business desk in May 2020 she worked as a City Hall reporter in Massachusetts, where she won regional awards for covering issues such as police accountability and the exploitation of undocumented restaurant workers.

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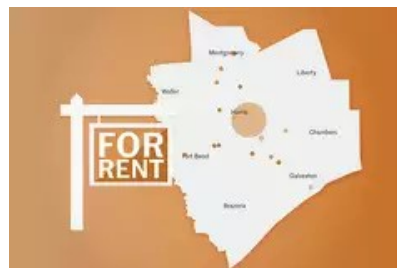
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