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**INVESTIGATIONS**

# Texas Railroad Commission shuts down defiant oilfield operation after West Texas earthquake

By **Amanda Drane**, *Investigative Reporter, Energy*

May 15, 2025

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Storage tanks at a salt water disposal well west of Midland.

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A defiant oilfield disposal company that continued to inject wastewater deep underground in an area of West Texas plagued by earthquakes has been ordered — again — to stop.

This time, Houston-based Blackbuck Resources must immediately stop operating its disposal well in Culberson County, in an area where the Texas Railroad Commission banned the practice in December 2023. The emergency order approved Tuesday by the commission legally compels Blackbuck to stop operating for at least 15 days.

The order follows a 5.4 magnitude quake that rattled West Texas the evening of May 3 — a strong temblor that tied for the largest of its kind in Texas history. The practice of injecting oilfield wastewater underground is causing earthquakes in the area.

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Blackbuck is the only company still injecting into the deep underground formations prohibited by the commission. In May 2024, the company challenged the commission's decision to suspend its permit, arguing its disposal well was geologically isolated and could not be contributing to the rash of earthquakes in the area. The case remains under review by an administrative law judge.

For technicians and scientists informing the commission's decision, the matter is clear. The area near the state's border with New Mexico overlays a system of faults being triggered as the wastewater drains, said Paul DuBois, the commission's assistant director of technical permitting.

What's more, DuBois told commissioners Tuesday it appears strong earthquakes like the one earlier this month are migrating closer to Blackbuck's operations after other disposal wells in the area have all shut down.

As of September of last year, Blackbuck was the only company injecting in the area in defiance of the commission's directive, DuBois said. Until now, the company was permitted to operate while its legal challenge was pending.

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The commission unanimously approved the emergency order.

"I don't see that we have a choice in this matter," Commissioner Jim Wright said.

Blackbuck CEO Samuel Oliver did not respond to a request for comment.

Blackbuck's operations ramped up at the end of April, in the two weeks leading

up to the latest high-magnitude earthquake, [state data shows](#).

Katie Smye, principal investigator at the Bureau of Economic Geology's Center for Injection and Seismicity Research at the University of Texas at Austin, said Wednesday in an interview that the scientific link between deep underground disposal and earthquakes is only growing stronger as the case against Blackbuck continues.

"The case is only strengthening over time," she said. "Our understanding is only growing of this system."

May 15, 2025



**Amanda Drane**

**INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER, ENERGY**



Amanda Drane is the energy investigative reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

Amanda is responsible for holding major energy companies, power providers and their leadership to account. She works to help audiences make sense of these companies' roles and responsibilities in major news events, while diving into some of the consequences of their choices and decisions in our region.

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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