

Permian Wells Longer Than Three Miles Now Make Up 15 Percent of New Completions, Federal Data Shows

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(PHOTO: PAUL RATJE | AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Operators in the [Permian](#) region of western Texas and eastern N

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a number on how fast that shift has happened. So-called super-lateral wells, those exceeding 15,000 feet, were virtually nonexistent in the basin before 2020. They accounted for 15 percent of all new Permian well completions in 2025.

The figures come from an [analysis of Permian well data](#) published by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, using well-level data from the analytics firm Enverus and production estimates from the agency's August 2026 Short-Term Energy Outlook.

The trend is not limited to the longest wells. Short-reach wells measuring less than 5,000 feet made up 43 percent of completions in 2015 but just 4 percent of horizontal wells by 2025. Mid-length laterals between 5,000 and 15,000 feet climbed from 57 percent of completions in 2015 to a peak of 90 percent in 2021, then settled at 81 percent in 2025 as super-laterals took a growing share. Averaged across all new horizontal wells, lateral length rose 77 percent in a decade, from 6,149 feet in 2015 to 10,867 feet in 2025.

Production Climbed Sharply While Well Counts Held Steady

The productivity gain is the reason the shift matters beyond the drilling industry. Combined oil and natural gas output in the Permian region rose from 2.9 million barrels of oil equivalent per day in 2015 to 11.2 million in 2025, a 284 percent increase, while the number of new horizontal well completions has hovered around 6,000 per year since 2022. Setting aside the market disruptions of 2020 and 2021, when negative oil prices and pandemic uncertainty sharply curtailed activity, the basin has been producing far more without drilling more wells meaningfully.

Longer laterals contact more reservoir rock per well, which is why operators can raise output while keeping well counts and overhead costs down. That arithmetic also implies fewer wells, and therefore potentially fewer surface locations, for a given volume of production. The Energy Information Administration does not quantify the surface footprint effect, and the true on

flowback, and above all water.

Water Volumes Are Rising Faster Than Disposal Capacity

Permian oil and gas production generates close to a billion gallons of wastewater a day. Known as produced water, it comes up alongside the oil, often at several times the volume of the oil itself, and it can be several times saltier than seawater. It can carry bromide, arsenic, strontium, barium, radioactive isotopes, and volatile organic compounds including benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylenes.

For decades, the standard answer was to inject it back underground into disposal wells. That practice has run into two limits. The first is induced seismicity. The Railroad Commission of Texas has designated Seismic Response Areas in West Texas where it restricts injection volumes, indefinitely suspended deep disposal in the Gardendale area between Odessa and Midland, and later suspended deep disposal permits across the Northern Culberson-Reeves Seismic Response Area after repeated earthquakes there, including several events of magnitude 5 or greater. The agency's [seismicity response actions](#) document the sequence. The second limit is pressure. Shifting injection to shallower formations has produced its own problems, including well blowouts and ground deformation.

In May 2025, the commission [tightened its permitting guidelines](#) for saltwater disposal wells across Districts 7C, 8, and 8A, doubling the area of review around an injection site from a quarter mile to half a mile, capping surface injection pressure based on geologic properties, and limiting daily injection volume based on reservoir pressure. The new criteria took effect June 1, 2025.

Regulators and Industry Now Point to the Same Bottleneck

At a Texas Senate Natural Resources Committee hearing in Aus⁷, Railroad Commissioner Jim Wright pressed the Texas Commission on

"Continued delay could restrict oil and gas development across the Permian Basin," Wright said, according to [Inside Climate News](#). "I respectfully urge TCEQ to finalize and issue workable permits as soon as possible."

Michael Lozano of the Permian Basin Petroleum Association told the same committee that companies could soon run out of disposal space. *"We're at this precipice," he said. "This is a large volume of water that we don't have avenues for that we're trying to rapidly create."*

Not everyone urged speed. Julie Range, policy manager for the nonprofit Commission Shift, noted during public comment that the state environmental agency has not made public any water quality standards for hazardous compounds in produced water and that much of the data informing the permitting process is not publicly available. *"Let's not trade one problem for another by hastily allowing unsafe waste fluids into our soils and into our rivers," she said.*

The research base is still thin. A peer-reviewed paper in [Irrigation Science](#) on using treated produced water to irrigate alfalfa reported that the approach has the potential to supplement existing irrigation resources, but its authors described the results as preliminary because the study covered a single growing season, and they recommended multi-year work on cumulative effects. A separate paper published in July in [Separation and Purification Technology](#) found that the short-term laboratory and bench-scale experiments conducted so far do not adequately capture operational variability or long-term reliability under real-world conditions.

Counties Where the Trade-Off Is Most Visible

The households closest to this are in a relatively small set of places. Midland and Ector counties around Midland and Odessa, and Reeves, Culberson, Loving, and Ward counties along the Texas side of the New Mex'

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the center of both the drilling activity and the disposal restrictions. Lea and

Residents in those counties are the ones who feel earthquakes, share two-lane highways with oilfield truck traffic, and depend on groundwater in a region where old and improperly plugged wellbores are a documented pathway for fluid migration. Rural landowners and groundwater conservation districts carry a burden that residents of Houston or Dallas, who benefit from the same production, do not.

Anyone in the region with a domestic or stock well who notices a change in water color, odor, or pressure should contact their local groundwater conservation district and can report suspected contamination or surface releases to the Railroad Commission. Residents who feel shaking can check event locations and magnitudes through the [TexNet Seismic Monitoring Program](#) operated by the University of Texas Bureau of Economic Geology and through the U.S. Geological Survey earthquake catalog.

What happens next runs on two tracks. A Texas Commission on Environmental Quality commissioner told an industry conference in Midland this month that a couple of produced water discharge applications are in the final stages of review, but said she could not identify them. No discharge permits have been issued, and the agency declined an interview request from Inside Climate News. The Railroad Commission continues its seismicity reviews within its response areas. Neither timeline is fixed, and Nature World News will report substantive changes as they are issued rather than as they are predicted.

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What Readers Want to Know

What did the federal data actually show? The Energy Information Administration reported on August 19 that wells with horizontal sections longer than 15,000 feet made up 15 percent of new Permian completions in 2025, up from almost nothing before 2020. Average lateral length across all new horizontal wells rose 77 percent in a decade.

Which areas are affected? The Permian region spans western Texas and eastern New Mexico. The most concentrated activity and the tightest disposal restrictions fall in Midland, Ector, Reeves, Culberson, Loving, and Ward counties in Texas and Lea and Eddy counties in New Mexico.

Do longer wells mean more or less surface disturbance? Longer laterals mean fewer wells are needed for the same production, which points toward fewer surface locations. But activity, truck traffic, and produced water volumes become more concentrated at each remaining site, and the federal analysis does not quantify the surface footprint either way.

Are the earthquakes in West Texas connected to oil and gas activity? The Railroad Commission of Texas has designated Seismic Response Areas and restricted injection on the basis that deep produced water disposal is likely contributing to seismic activity in those areas. Research through the TexNet program has also linked some events to hydraulic fracturing rather than disposal alone.

projects are underway, but researchers publishing on the topic have described existing results as preliminary and called for multi-year studies. No discharge permits have been issued.

What should rural residents watch for? Changes in well water color, odor, or pressure, unexplained surface releases or standing fluid near wellheads, and felt shaking. Local groundwater conservation districts handle water complaints, and the Railroad Commission takes reports on oilfield releases.

When will there be more information? A state environmental commissioner has said a couple of produced water discharge applications are close but has not named them or given a date. The Railroad Commission continues seismicity reviews within its response areas.

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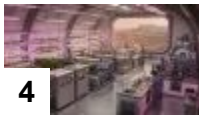


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