

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 19, 2025

The Honorable Doug Burgum
U.S. Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum,

As Members of Congress representing communities impacted by orphaned oil and gas wells, we write to express our concern regarding the Department of the Interior's (DOI) pause on orphaned well remediation funding provided in the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)*.

As we are certain you know, inactive oil and gas wells with no known owner (orphaned wells) can pose a considerable threat to our communities' public health and environment. Without proper maintenance, these orphaned wells can lead to significant emissions of methane and other pollutants. The highest-emitting unplugged wells can release 76 kilograms (kgs) of methane per hour, a rate equivalent to the greenhouse gas emissions of 4,000 gasoline-powered cars annually.¹ Orphaned wells can also lead to significant groundwater contamination and other dangers. 14 million Americans live within one mile of an orphaned well, creating a serious public health risk.²

According to the Interstate Oil & Gas Compact Commission, there are more than 141,000 documented orphaned oil and gas wells on state and private land and an estimated 250,000-740,000 undocumented orphaned wells around the country.³ DOI has also identified more than 16,000 orphaned wells on federal land.⁴

¹ Riddick, Stuart N., Mbua, Mercy, et al, "Methane emissions from abandoned oil and gas wells in Colorado," *Science of The Total Environment* (2024), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S004896972401129X>.

² "Landmark study reveals that millions of Americans live less than a mile from an orphaned oil and gas well," *Environmental Defense Fund* (2023), <https://blogs.edf.org/energyexchange/2023/07/11/landmark-study-reveals-that-millions-of-americans-live-less-than-a-mile-from-an-orphaned-oil-and-gas-well/>.

³ "Idle and Orphan Oil and Gas Wells: State and Provincial Regulatory Strategies-Supplemental Information on Orphan Well Plugging and Site Restoration," *Interstate Oil & Gas Compact Commission* (2024).

⁴ Statement of Dr. Steve Feldgus before the House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, "Benefits of the Legacy Pollution Clean-Up Programs in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law," (2022), <https://www.doi.gov/ocl/pollution-clean-programs>.

To address this issue, Congress authorized more than \$4.6 billion of funding for DOI in the *IJA* to administer orphaned well plugging, remediation, and restoration programming. This program represents years of bipartisan work on this issue, including the bipartisan *Revive Economic Growth and Reclaim Orphaned Wells Act*, which was included in the *IJA*. As of June 2024, more than 9,000 orphaned wells were plugged across state, private, and federal lands with *IJA* funds.⁵ We have heard from state agencies administering these funds that the scale and reliability of this funding for this purpose has been transformational in this work.

On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued an executive order titled “Unleashing American Energy” that directed agencies to pause distribution of *IJA* funding.⁶ Your Order 3418 on February 3, 2025, directing your Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget to determine how to issue *IJA* funding in accordance with President Trump’s priorities.⁷ To date, we have seen no clear, public guidance from DOI regarding the implementation of paused *IJA* funding.

As of September 2024, \$3.4 billion in *IJA* funding remained available for orphaned well remediation.⁸ This funding represents thousands of jobs for people who work in the oil and gas industry. In fiscal year 2024 alone, DOI’s *IJA* orphaned well obligations supported more than 6,000 jobs and contributed \$861 million to the economy (an approximate 140% return on investment rate).⁹ This program has also led to many workforce development initiatives and partnerships, creating new opportunities in high-paying careers. Communities where well remediation service providers are based also benefit from increased demand for supporting industries like contract materials, food services, and lodging.¹⁰ Pausing this funding with no clear guidance for impacted parties will harm our economies and the skilled energy workers whose jobs depend on DOI maintaining a dependable and transparent process. We have already begun to hear from *IJA* funding recipients impacted by this pause who now face an uncertain future after DOI issued a stop work order on their orphaned well remediation projects.

DOI’s Orphaned Wells Program Office’s own strategic plan for fiscal years 2025-2030 includes an objective to “build effective, efficient, and collaborative partnerships” with funding

⁵ “Orphaned Wells Program Annual Report to Congress,” *Department of the Interior Orphaned Wells Program Office* (2024), <https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-11/fy-2024-owpo-annual-congressional-reportfinal-publishing.pdf>.

⁶ Executive Order Number 14154, 90 FR 8353, (2025).

⁷ U.S. Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum, “Unleashing American Energy” Secretary’s Order 3418 (2025), <https://www.doi.gov/document-library/secretary-order/so-3418-unleashing-american-energy>.

⁸ Department of the Interior Orphaned Wells Program Office, “Orphaned Wells Program Annual Report to Congress.”

⁹ Department of the Interior Orphaned Wells Program Office, “Orphaned Wells Program Annual Report to Congress.”

¹⁰ Department of the Interior Orphaned Wells Program Office, “Orphaned Wells Program Annual Report to Congress.”

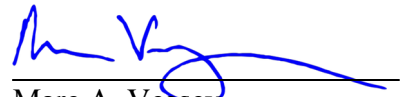
recipients.¹¹ Creating chaos and blocking funding will not create the trust needed for productive partnerships.

We urge you to resume distribution of this Congressionally directed funding immediately. It protects our communities, cleans up our environment, and builds our economy. Should you have any questions or wish to discuss this issue, we would welcome the opportunity to do so.

Sincerely,



Lizzie Fletcher
Member of Congress



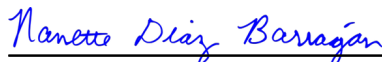
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Scott H. Peters
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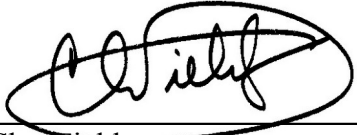


Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



Troy A. Carter, Sr.
Member of Congress

¹¹ “Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2025-2030,” *Department of the Interior Orphaned Wells Program Office* (2024), <https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-10/owpo-strategic-plan-final-20241015.pdf>.



Cleo Fields
Member of Congress



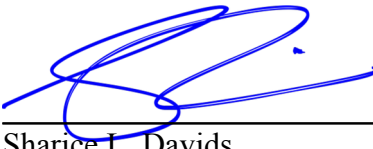
Kevin Mullin
Member of Congress



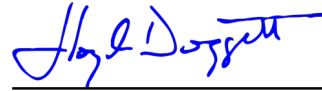
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Emanuel Cleaver, II
Member of Congress



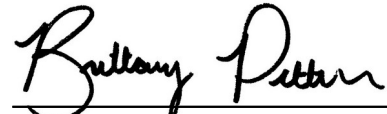
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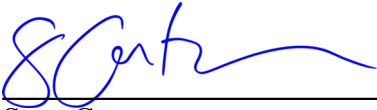
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Member of Congress



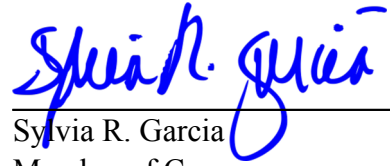
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Member of Congress



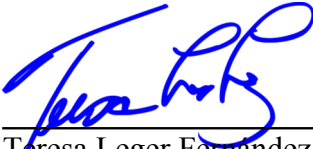
Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress



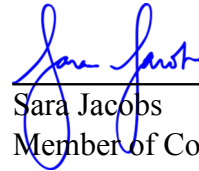
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