

The Honorable Glenn “GT” Thompson (PA-15)
Testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
Legislative Hearing on Discussion Draft of H.R. ____, H.R. 7053, H.R. 8665, and H.R. 8954
Tuesday, July 23, 2024

Subcommittee Chairman Stauber, Ranking Member Ocasio-Cortez, and Members of the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources:

Good morning and thank you for providing the opportunity to share my support for H.R. 7053, which is being considered at today’s hearing. Representing the great Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a state with a long and proud history of oil and gas production, I am keenly aware of the environmental and economic challenges posed by abandoned and orphan wells. These wells, either unplugged or improperly plugged, can pose serious environmental threats to surrounding communities.

A study conducted this year by the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission (IOGCC) reported a total of 141,959 documented orphan wells in the 29 states participating in the report, with potentially thousands more left undocumented.¹ Many known orphan wells have no verifiable ownership or operator, which makes it more difficult for state agencies to prioritize which wells to plug. In Pennsylvania alone, there are approximately 27,230 documented abandoned and orphan oil and gas wells according to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

The federal government currently allocates significant resources across a number of agencies to address these wells, such as the Orphan Wells Program Office within the Department of the Interior; however, the *Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act* (IIJA) (P.L. 117-58) provided \$4.7 billion in grants to qualifying state agencies for plugging operations. Since the IIJA was signed into law, \$701 million has been distributed to twenty-four states for well plugging projects, according to the Department of the Interior². Unfortunately, in many cases, funding to states came with unexpected and costly strings attached that are hindering efficient and effective plugging efforts on the ground. The initial grant guidance issued to state agencies by the Department of the Interior mandates an inspection of each potential orphan well site to test for leaks of methane and other gases, and, if identified, to measure the rates of such leaks. This additional testing requirement, which was not included in the IIJA, can significantly impact states by requiring more staff, costing thousands of dollars per well and significantly delaying plugging operations.

To maximize the effect of federal dollars, methane air and groundwater testing requirements must be optional, not required, for states to access federal funding. That is why I was proud to introduce H.R. 7053, the *Orphan Well Grant Flexibility Act*, to empower states like Pennsylvania to maximize their operational flexibility in addressing this critical issue. This bipartisan legislation would grant states greater discretion and flexibility when utilizing federal orphan well

¹ Idle and Orphan Oil and Gas Wells: State and Provincial Regulatory Strategies 2024, [Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission](#)

² FY 2023 Orphan Wells Congressional Report, [U.S. Department of the Interior](#)

grant funds allocated through the IJA. Specifically, H.R. 7053 will ensure that pre- and post-plugging methane testing is permitted, but not required, for states that utilize federal funding for well plugging operations. This would allow states to tailor their plugging programs to the specific needs and challenges they face. For instance, Pennsylvania has a large number of shallow wells, requiring different plugging techniques compared to deeper wells in other states.

Additionally, H.R. 7053 emphasizes the economic benefits that plugging abandoned and orphan wells provide to local communities. Studies, such as the aforementioned 2024 IOGCC Orphan Well Study, demonstrate that plugging orphan and abandoned wells creates jobs and revitalizes local economies. The bill directs the National Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, to evaluate the economic development, housing trends, and environmental benefits in areas where federal funds have been used successful to plug and remediate abandoned and orphan wells. This will provide a clear picture of the returns on these federal investments, as well as potential areas for improvement.

The benefits of the *Orphan Well Grant Flexibility Act* are clear. This bill offers a commonsense, bipartisan solution to addressing abandoned and orphan wells across the country, which is why it has received support from a range of industry, environmental, and conservation stakeholders across the ideological spectrum. By empowering states and communities, H.R. 7053 will expedite well plugging, save taxpayers, protect ecosystems, and revitalize local economies.

Once again, I thank the Members of this Subcommittee for considering the significant environmental and economic benefits of H.R. 7053 and advancing this critical legislation. I am looking forward to working with you all to revitalize our communities, protect our environment, and create high-quality, family-sustaining jobs.