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Rural Westerners Condemn BLM's Rollback of 2024 Bonding Rates

*Residents argue that BLM's revision to the Biden-era oil and gas rule
will once again incentivize producers to leave toxic messes*

Billings, Mont. – Members of the Western Organization of Resource Councils today condemned a [move by the Interior Department to revise the Bureau of Land Management's 2024 onshore oil and gas rule](#). The revision significantly reduces the statewide bonding requirements, which now revert to what they were before the BLM issued its rule in April 2024—the same rates companies were paying in the 1950s and 60s, and far below the costs of plugging and reclaiming wells today. These rates are also far below what many state agencies charge for oil and gas development on state and private lands.

“A 1960 dollar is worth \$10.95 today, so what companies will now pay in federal bonding is a tiny fraction of what it actually costs to clean up abandoned wells,” says **Bob LeResche**, former Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources and board member of the [Powder River Basin Resource Council](#). “Economically rational companies would rather just forfeit their absurdly low bonds and abandon wells rather than pay to plug them and rehabilitate the sites. But somebody has to pay, and that's going to be American taxpayers.”

With this revision to the oil and gas rule, operators will no longer have to post a minimum bond of \$500,000 for all their wells in a state; instead, they will pay \$25,000.

“For decades, contamination from unplugged and orphaned wells has been a source of health problems for people who live on Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikra (MHA) Nation lands,” says **Lisa DeVille**, member of [Dakota Resource Council](#) and citizen of the MHA Nation. “In the last few years, North Dakota, using millions in federal funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, has been working to plug and reclaim wells throughout the state. But with the rollback of bonding rates, we’re opening the door to even more orphan wells. It makes absolutely no sense.

“I am deeply disappointed that our former governor and current interior secretary, Doug Burgum, approved this rollback. His decision suggests a prioritization of oil and gas interests over his responsibility to steward America’s public lands and minerals.”

There are currently an estimated 2.6 million unplugged wells across the country leaking methane, benzene, and other toxic substances that sicken people, pollute air and water, and do untold harm to wildlife.

“I live in Jackson County, Colorado, where companies left hundreds of orphaned oil wells on public lands after drilling was done and profits banked,” says Barbara Vasquez, board member of the [Western Colorado Alliance](#) and the Western Organization of Resource Councils. “This move to roll back bonding rates to what they were over 60 years ago says the quiet part out loud: the administration has become the handmaiden of the fossil fuel industry, eager to allow oil and gas companies to profit handsomely from publicly-owned minerals without any of the responsibility that comes with it.”

[Colorado College’s 2026 Conservation in the West Poll](#) found that 90% of Coloradans, 95% of Wyomingites, and 95% of Montanans support a requirement that oil and gas companies, rather than taxpayers, pay for all of the clean-up and land restoration costs after drilling is finished.

“This decision to reduce bonding requirements stands in diametric opposition to the priorities of Western communities. It reflects a continued disregard for the people who must shoulder the environmental and public-health consequences,” says Kirk Panasuk, a rancher in northeast Montana and member of Northern Plains Resource Council.

“For years, I have watched neighbors contend with contaminated water and damaged land caused by poorly regulated industrial activity,” Panasuk adds. “I have personally faced serious health concerns after exposure to fumes from nearby oil and gas wells. Irresponsible policies like this shift the risks and costs onto working people, while corporate executives and the politicians who support them continue to profit and remain insulated from the impacts.”

The revision to the oil and gas rule also drastically shortens the public comment period for leasing decisions, reducing it from 90 to 10 days.

“This move by Interior is another nail in the coffin for the National Environmental Policy Act, and again demonstrates that this administration is intent on shutting out those who will be most

directly impacted by leasing decisions from having any real say over how our public lands and minerals are managed,” says Sarah Hunkins, WORC’s Washington D.C. Representative.

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Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is a network of nine grassroots organizations in eight Western states committed to common-sense reform in agriculture, oil and gas development, coal mine reclamation, and rural economic development. Headquartered in Billings, Mont., WORC also has an office in Washington, D.C.