October 26, 2026

The Honorable Jeff Landry
Governor of Louisiana

Via email: jeff.landry@la.gov

Re: Launching a Countdown to Cleanup of Coastal Wells

Dear Governor Landry:

We write on behalf of a coalition of organizations to urge you to show decisive leadership to ensure that the oil and gas industry honors its obligations to Louisiana's coast by plugging the thousands of inactive wells that blight the state's oceans and wetlands before they become the state's responsibility.

We recognize your administration's commitment to clean up these legacy sites. You've championed the restructuring and rebranding of the Department of Conservation and Energy (C&E). You also recently celebrated a legal settlement requiring ExxonMobil to help the state plug coastal wells. While a settlement with one company will make a difference, it's not the lasting policy change that Louisiana needs. Now's the time to set out an affirmative vision for getting the oil and gas industry to clean up the dangerously aging wells it has left behind.

According to LSU's Center for Energy Studies, there were approximately 4,900 orphan wells across the state as of March 2025. In 2026, that number skyrocketed to more than 6,300. Orphan wells are those whose current operators are unwilling or unable to plug them—leaving the state responsible for them. Louisiana has *never* been able to reduce its orphan well population because the number of wells that oil companies abandon to the state is far outpacing the state's ability to plug them. C&E restores an average of 125 well sites a year. At that rate, it'll take more than 50 years just to plug the current population of orphan wells.

The oil companies that profited from these wells should be the ones plugging them. Yet public resources are being used to clean up orphaned wells based only on the current operators' failure to plug them, even when there are former well operators that could afford to do it. At least 724 of the state's orphan wells were once owned by some of the largest oil corporations in the world, including their predecessors and acquisitions.

If Louisiana is ever going to get ahead of this problem, it must focus on getting oil companies to comply with their obligations to plug the wells they've profited from *before* the wells are orphaned. This should start with requiring companies to plug their inactive wells.

The state's policy of allowing companies to indefinitely avoid plugging their inactive wells by paying a small fee only makes the problem worse. In 2019, there were 17,775 inactive wells. Now, there are more than 22,000. Moreover, Inactive Well Assessment data shows that the state has not collected around 17% ($1.6 million) of the $9.8 million in fees that operators owed it in 2024 and 2025—meaning that the state is losing out on funds it uses to plug orphaned wells.

Prioritizing cleanup of offshore and coastal wells is critically important. Derelict wells are at risk of leaking oil, gas, and other toxic chemicals, which can poison drinking water, smother coastal wetlands, sicken fish and wildlife, and devastate the workers whose livelihoods depend on a clean

and healthy coast. Submerged and poorly marked wellheads, pilings, flowlines, platforms, and related debris can also damage vessels, endanger operators and passengers, restrict access to fishing areas, and impose substantial repair and operating costs.

Derelict wells pose a particularly high risk to the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary, which lies between the Atchafalaya and Mississippi Rivers, spans 16 parishes, and is the fastest disappearing landmass on Earth. The estuary's coastal waters, wetlands, and swamps serve as essential breeding, feeding, and nursery grounds for hundreds of species of birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, and shellfish, including commercially important species such as blue crab, white and brown shrimp, oysters, clams, redfish, and black drum. The estuary is highly valuable to bird species dependent on marshes and island habitats, including the millions of birds who migrate along the Mississippi Flyway each spring and fall. It also protects Louisiana's communities and industries by sequestering climate-warming carbon and providing a critical buffer from storm surges.

The 3,231 inactive wells and 509 orphaned wells located within the estuary place all these values at risk. As you know, rapid coastal land loss—caused in part by dredging of oil and gas navigation canals—imperils Louisiana's coast. Scientists warn that the state could lose 75% of its remaining coastal wetlands by 2070 if it does not make significant progress on climate mitigation and coastal restoration efforts. The idle and orphan wells that litter the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary and other coastal areas will undermine the state's coastal restoration goals by delaying projects, increasing project costs, and even limiting which projects are feasible.

Well 59, which blew out in Garden Island Bay last year, is a reminder that delay and neglect costs millions. For more than a week, the 82-year-old well, which hadn't produced oil since 1997 (when it was still owned by Texaco), spewed at least 172,000 gallons of an oily water mixture into the marshes of Plaquemines Parish. It may be years before we understand the true cost of the spill to Louisiana's fish and wildlife, but the sheen drifted into important habitats for imperiled species, including loggerhead sea turtles, piping plovers, and Rice's whale. The initial cost to clean up the spill was $24 million. Neglect costs the taxpayer.

There are hundreds more inactive wells in Garden Island Bay, along with the thousands of idle wells in the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary. These wells need to be plugged before another disaster strikes. Former generations drilled these sites oilfield by oilfield, not well by well. Organizing cleanup by field—including all platforms, flowlines, and wells—would streamline the state's restoration efforts, allow consolidation of bids, and create more certainty for oil service companies willing to finish the job that drillers started. It would also lower overall costs of decommissioning while stopping more oil spills and reclaiming more steel out of our coast.

Focusing on fields also helps priorities become clear—the fields with the richest species and habitats and the most spills, leaks, and maritime hazards deserve the highest priority. Of the top ten oilfields by count of idle wells in southern Louisiana, nine of these fields are in the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary and the majority of them could conflict with coastal restoration goals and access to sand used to sustain our coast. The estuary's top 25 oilfields by idle well count contain almost half of all idle wells in the southern part of the state. By focusing on wells in Barataria-Terrebonne, we can fix the worst and most dangerous portion of the orphan well crisis.

Louisiana's coast can't wait any longer. That's why we're urging you to work with C&E and the Natural Resources Trust Authority to adopt a "countdown to cleanup," with the goal of getting all

inactive and orphaned wells plugged within 10 years. You can do this through robust enforcement, adopting new policies, and championing regulations and legislation that would do the following:

- Prioritize getting the industry to plug offshore and coastal wells. These wells are at high risk of failure, are most likely to impede coastal restoration efforts, and are the most costly and complicated to plug.
- Develop a plugging plan based on priority fields, not just by well.
- Adopt a process for C&E to require former operators to plug wells *before* it resorts to declaring an oilfield site orphaned.
- Ensure that the financial security for each well reflects the true cost of plugging.
- Close the loophole that allows operators to pay an inactive well fee in lieu of plugging idle wells.
- Bar transfers of state leases to or from companies with overdue well-plugging obligations.
- Ensure that C&E and the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority are coordinating on coastal restoration projects.

These reforms represent an investment in Louisiana's workforce. More than 20,000 Louisiana oil and gas workers have lost their jobs since 2013. These workers have the skills, training, and experience necessary to safely plug wells and restore the coast, and your actions can put them back to work.

Would you be willing to meet with representatives of Healthy Gulf, the Center for Biological Diversity, and others to discuss your vision for fixing Louisiana's inactive and orphan well problem? Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Rachel Mathews
Senior Attorney, Oceans
Center for Biological Diversity
rmathews@biologicaldiversity.org

Scott Eustis
Community Science Director
Healthy Gulf
scotteustis@healthygulf.org

Joined by:

Dr. Beverly Wright
Deep South Center for Environmental Justice

Rebecca Triche
Louisiana Wildlife Federation

James Hiatt
For a Better Bayou

Debra Sullivan Ramirez
Mossville Environmental Action Network

Alyssa Portaro
Habitat Recovery Project

Roishetta Ozane
Vessel Project of Louisiana

CC: Julie Emerson, Chief of Staff, Louisiana Office of the Governor (julie.emerson@la.gov)