

* September 17, 2022
* |**Cleaning up from the past**

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**George Banziger**

**Mid-Ohio Valley Climate Corner**

One of the most daunting tasks confronting those areas that comprise the Appalachian region is the repair of damage caused by the unfettered extraction of oil and gas that took place since 1860. Abandoned and orphaned oil and gas wells are an environmental and safety hazard that leach pollutants into the air and water including methane, which is many times more powerful as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. These wells, many of which were drilled before modern regulatory regimens, contaminate ground water, threaten agriculture, reduce property values and can cause dangerous explosions. A stark example of the danger of these wells was the Veto Lake blowout that occurred in western Washington County in August 2021. Although the Ohio Department of Natural Resources has not come up with a final report on this event, many assume that the large effluent of raw petroleum was the result of disturbance of an orphaned oil well by excessive injection of brine waste in western Washington County.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that there are 746,000 abandoned and orphaned oil & gas wells in the U.S., and that the cost of closing these wells is between $78 billion and $280 billion. The Ohio River Valley Institute (Boettner, 2021) has reviewed the situation of these wells in four states of the Ohio River Valley–Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. These four states account for over one-third of abandoned wells in the U.S. The cost of plugging each well varies considerably–from $6,500 to $87,500. At the rate at which these wells were plugged since 2018 it would take 895 years to complete the job!

But some help is on the way to begin to address this challenging task. An important part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act passed by Congress last fall is the Federal Orphaned Well Program. This program provides $94.7 billion over nine years, 91% of which goes to the states. Much of these funds, in the form of performance grants, are directed to the four states in the Ohio River Valley and are intended to lower unemployment and improve the economic conditions of distressed areas like West Virginia and Appalachian Ohio. It is estimated that 15,151 jobs could be created over 20 years to carry out this important work of plugging orphaned wells. The ORVI study reports that $216 million from these federal funds will go to West Virginia and $334 million to Ohio. The agencies responsible for these funds are: the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (Division of Oil & Gas Resources Management) and in West Virginia the Department of Environmental Protection (Office of Oil and Gas).

On Sept.9, 2022, the Marietta Times reported that Keith Faber, the State Auditor of Ohio, was in Marietta the day before to describe the state plans for plugging abandoned oil and gas wells. He indicated that state funds are available through ODNR for financial services to local governments and that the goals of the state program for plugging abandoned wells are to: improve the inventory, increase the number of wells put to bid, and explore the use of contractors and public/private partnerships to address the problem. He also made the rather startling admission that ODNR has never met its expenditure requirement for these funds. His statements should be a call to arms for local entrepreneurs and public entities with an interest in addressing this serious environmental problem and in job creation.

President Bill Ruud of Marietta College has mentioned the College’s plans to expand its Department of Petroleum Engineering and Geology into an Energy Center. As he seeks input into the scope this new Center, he is well advised to include projects to address the problem of abandoned oil and gas wells as among the tasks of this program. There are research, pressing environmental and employment issues associated with abandoned oil and gas wells, and grant funds available to carry out these tasks.

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George Banziger, Ph..D., was a faculty member at Marietta College and an academic dean at three other colleges. Now retired, he is a volunteer for the Harvest of Hope. He is a member of the Green Sanctuary Committee of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Marietta, Citizens Climate Lobby, and of the Mid-Ohio Valley Climate Action team.