



Orphan oil and gas wells raise contamination fears on northeast B.C. farmland

WENDY STUECK >

VANCOUVER

INCLUDES CLARIFICATION

PUBLISHED JANUARY 3, 2019

UPDATED 2 DAYS AGO

FOR SUBSCRIBERS





the most protected agricultural lands, raising concerns about potential contamination.

Figures from the B.C. Oil and Gas Commission (OGC), the province's energy regulator, show that of the 326 orphan wells (or wells with no solvent operator) currently identified by the commission, 145 fall within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), a designated zone set up to protect farmland.

Orphan wells are those whose owners have gone bankrupt or can't be found. In British Columbia, companies in the oil and gas industry must pay a levy intended to cover the cost of cleaning up orphan wells. Of the total in the province, only 16 have been restored – a process that involves certification by the OGC based on ensuring any contamination of soil, groundwater and surface water is below specified thresholds.

Twenty are expected to be restored by March.

The figures provided in response to a request from The Globe



said Lenore Newman, who holds a Canada Research Chair in Food Security and the Environment at the University of the Fraser Valley.

As part of a government-appointed advisory committee, Dr. Newman helped write an interim report last year that found the “development of the important and expanding provincial oil and gas resources in the [northeast part of the province] has exceeded the capacity of the current regulatory environment to protect farmland.”

“The weakness of the current system is that the OGC has been handed a blank cheque to develop their industry as rapidly as possible,” Dr. Newman said in an e-mail. “They don’t have the knowledge or the manpower in-house to adequately address the long-term impact on farmland,” she added.

In an e-mailed statement, the commission said oil and gas



... regulatory regime does a good job of protecting agricultural land.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

GET COMPREHENSIVE DATA REPORTS IN THE GLOBE DATASTORE



However, he also supported the NDP's new legislation to

... funds for ...



that require cleanup and reclamation has ballooned to more than 210,000.

Following the investigation, B.C. and Alberta announced they would impose timelines to clean up idle oil and gas wells.

The Globe's investigation described how major companies routinely shuffle inactive properties, which come with costly clean-up obligations, to smaller players, raising concerns that clean-up expenses won't be met.

Wells that aren't properly plugged and sealed can pose dangers to the environment and to people by, for example, leaking methane or contaminating ground or surface water.

In B.C., the tally of orphan sites climbed from 38 in 2014 to 326 in November of this year, with the increase due primarily to two companies going into receivership.



The province has about 25,000 oil and gas wells. Of those, under 1.5 per cent are considered orphan sites, according to the OGC.

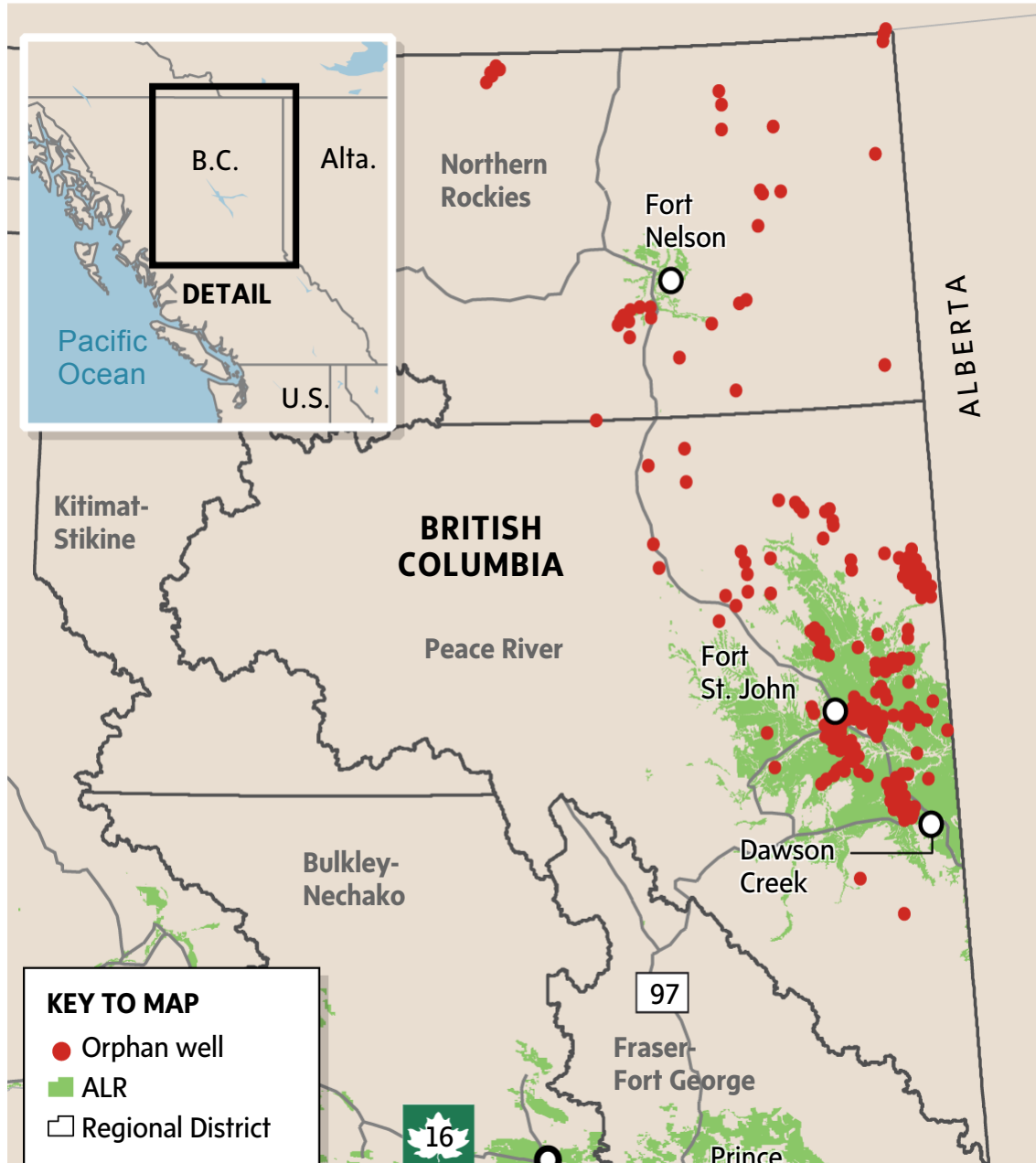
In a statement, B.C.'s Agriculture Minister Lana Popham referred to new legislation related to orphan wells and said the government would take further steps if required.

"While less than 2 per cent of the Agricultural Land Reserve in the northeast is occupied by oil and gas activities, our government recognizes the importance of protecting this land for future agricultural use," she said.

The NDP government in November also passed legislation, Bill 52, that brought in new rules that restricted home sizes in the ALR, reinstated a single zone for all land in the reserve (the previous government had brought in a two-zone system) and hiked penalties for illegal dumping.



a zone set aside for agricultural production.





RELATED

Oil patch fails to clean up growing stockpile of abandoned wells 

Canadian Natural pushes energy watchdog to block deals adding to cleanup costs 

Supreme Court case on oil wells pits provincial environmental rules against federal insolvency laws

TRENDING

1

OPINION

The 2019 Golden Globes forget about #MeToo, settle for #MeMeMe 

BARRY HERTZ

2

In photos: What the stars wore at the 2019 Golden Globe Awards

3

Monday's TSX breakouts: A dividend stock that rallied during the market meltdown 



SUBSCRIBE

BUSINESS SERVICES

CONTACT US

READER SERVICES

ABOUT US

© Copyright 2019 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher

