

Advisory Land Use Planning Notes on Abandoned Well Sites

Introduction

These planning notes provide important information to municipal officials, planners, development officers and landowners on obtaining information about the locations of abandoned oil and gas well sites and how to accommodate them within areas where development, subdivision, or construction may occur. This information should be seriously considered when preparing municipal subdivision and development plans, other statutory plans, and/or land use bylaws. It will also assist in evaluating development permits and subdivision applications, and in planning municipal works that may require excavation near abandoned well sites. This information has been jointly prepared by Municipal Affairs (MA) and the Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB).

The Issue

The location of oil and gas wells that are being drilled or are actively producing is evident, both from the surface and through a notation on the land title. Abandonment of an oil and gas well occurs by rendering the well incapable of flow and placing a cap over the casing approximately one meter below the surface. ERCB *Directive 020: Abandoned Wells* sets out minimum well abandonment requirements that ensure the integrity of the wellbore and protect public safety and the environment.

After surface reclamation is complete and a certificate is issued by Alberta Environment, the well site lease notation may be removed from the title. At this point, there is nothing visible on the surface or on the title to indicate the presence of an abandoned well.

Abandoned wells rarely require maintenance but adequate access to the site needs to be maintained in case it is necessary due to a leak. Repairing an abandoned well usually requires a service rig and, at times, may require a drilling rig which requires a larger work area and access.

The abandoned well bore is not visible on the surface and therefore may represent a risk to excavation and construction equipment and safety of the equipment operator if abandoned wells are not properly located.

The risk to public health and safety from an abandoned well is very low, however the ERCB recommends that appropriate setback distances be maintained between

abandoned wells and surface development and that municipalities apply these setbacks to allow for both well site access and prevention of accidental contact of a well bore with construction equipment. Municipal efforts to ensure that abandoned well sites are appropriately considered and suitable setbacks incorporated in planning, development, and construction decisions will assist in meeting planning responsibilities.

Obtaining Abandoned Well Site Records

The ERCB began documenting the method utilized to abandon oil and gas wells in January, 1945. The records for a small number of wells drilled prior to this time are not complete. In areas where wells drilled prior to 1945 are located, the ERCB may be able to provide information on how these sites were abandoned and advise on setbacks or other measures that are required to avoid potential conflict.

Information about abandoned well locations by township can be obtained by contacting ERCB Information Services by telephone at 403 297-8311 (select 2), by fax at 403 297-7040, by email Infoservices@ercb.ca, or by mail to 640 – 5 Avenue S.W. Calgary AB T2P 3G4 (prior to October 30, 2010), 250 – 5 Street S.W. Calgary AB T2P 0R4 (after October 30, 2010).

Information on surface reclamation standards and procedures can be obtained from Alberta Environment. Information on specific reclamation certificates on private land can be obtained from the Environmental Law Centre. Alberta One Call does not currently have information with respect to abandoned wells.

Setbacks from Abandoned Well Sites

The ERCB is currently developing specific setback distances that will be incorporated into the Subdivision and Development Regulation. In the interim, it recommends a setback consisting of a 20 metre by 35 metre work area surrounding the abandoned well. The setback boundaries should be established so that the well is no less than 5 metres from the setback boundary. An 8 metre access to this setback area is also needed.

The setback is to allow equipment access and necessary work space to a leaking well for maintenance should it become necessary, to protect the well bore from damage, and to avoid damage to any construction or excavation equipment that may be used in construction of buildings or utilities on the site and injury to equipment operators.

Abandoned well sites and the associated setback and access areas should be incorporated into subdivision and development proposals. Possible surface land uses that incorporate abandoned well sites include boulevards, road allowances, golf courses, parking lots, open storage areas, parks, open space, and playing fields. Identification of

abandoned well sites will help in determining an effective subdivision design, the location of building sites, siting of underground utilities, and grading of land.

Applications for Subdivision, Development and Construction

Where a development is planned, a search for abandoned wells in the vicinity of the proposed development area should be conducted. At the time of excavation and servicing, a temporary identification marker should be placed as precisely as possible on the abandoned well site to prevent damage both to the well and to construction or excavation equipment, and to prevent injury to equipment operators. If the municipal approving authority believes that an abandoned well site could be within an area proposed for subdivision, development or construction, the applicant should provide the following information:

- a listing of the abandoned well sites including the coordinates,
- identification of abandoned well site locations and the necessary setback area on the sketch accompanying the application,
- if the application will result in construction, a statement confirming that the abandoned well sites are marked with onsite identification.

Special Circumstances

Generally, referral of applications to the ERCB is not necessary. When asked, the ERCB will comment on land use proposals where:

- A land use proposal seeks to establish separation distances from abandoned wells smaller than those recommended in these notes.
- The proponent or the planning authority believes that the ERCB should be consulted because of relevant special characteristics of the land use proposal.

Further Information

For more information, please contact

Energy Resources Conservation Board Address Prior to October 30, 2010 640 5 th Avenue S.W. Calgary, Alberta T2P 3G4 Address After October 30, 2010 250, 5 th Street S.W. Calgary, Alberta T2P 0R4 Telephone: 403-297-8311	Alberta Municipal Affairs Municipal Services Branch Planning and Coordination Unit 17 th Floor, 10155 102 Street Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4L4 Telephone: 780-427-2225 Facsimile: 780-420-1016 email: lgsmail@gov.ab.ca
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Facsimile: 403-297-7040 email: Infoservices@ercb.ca	
Alberta Environment Environmental Sciences Division 4th Floor Oxbridge Place 9820 106 Street Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2J6 Telephone: 780-427-5883 Facsimile: 780-422-4192 Email: land.management@gov.ab.ca	Reclamation certificates on private land: Environmental Law Centre #204, 10709 Jasper Avenue Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3N3 Telephone: 780-424-5099 Facsimile: 780-424-5133