

Modernizing Oil & Gas Bonding & Clean Up Rules in NM

Strategic Messaging Guidance

Core Problem

New Mexico faces between \$700 million and \$1.6 billion in well cleanup costs, largely because oil and gas corporations are not required to post sufficient bonds to cover cleanup costs. This exposes taxpayers, public funds, communities, and the environment to harm and contributes to a legacy of pollution in New Mexico. A bond is like a security deposit oil corporations pay to guarantee they'll clean up their mess when they're done drilling.

Our families' health matters. That's why we need to protect the air we breathe and the water we drink. But today, the rules allow wealthy oil and gas corporations to sometimes abandon the wells they drill to save money rather than pay what they agreed to safely clean them up. Abandoned wells can leak toxins into drinking water and the air, kill wildlife, and lead to fires, explosions or other accidents. We need to make these wealthy corporations clean up the wells they drill to protect the health and safety of our communities.

The Big Picture: If You Drill It, You Clean It

Every New Mexican knows: if you make a mess, you clean it up. No exceptions. But right now, oil and gas corporations are drilling thousands of wells, making billions in profit—and walking away from the damage they leave behind. They take the resources. We're left with the risk, the pollution, and the bill. We need bonding rules that protect our land, water, and future—not corporate profits. If bonding isn't set high enough now, during the boom, there's often not enough money left to cover cleanup after the bust—shifting the cost to the public.

Bottom line:

If oil and gas corporations want to continue to drill in New Mexico, they need to clean up after themselves. It's time to fix the rules so the people who make the mess are the ones who clean it up 100% of the time.

Recommended Framing Principles

Based on [Voss Bonding Message Testing](#), [Talk Like a Human](#) & [NM Narrative Handbook](#)

Principle

Messaging Guidance

Human-first

Focus on people's health, land, and livelihoods – not policy details. Use emotional, values-driven storytelling.

Shared responsibility	Emphasize fairness: "If you make a mess, you clean it up."
New Mexican pride	Ground messaging in shared love for land, water, and community – especially among rural, Tribal, and working families.
Prevention over reaction	Emphasize that stronger rules prevent crisis, pollution, and financial waste down the line, and will provide relief for ongoing harm in the short term.
Accountability, not blame	Avoid "bad guys" framing. Emphasize smart, proactive reforms that ensure everyone plays by the same rules.

Message Building Blocks

The Problem: Right now, oil and gas corporations in New Mexico can drill dozens of wells while only putting up a tiny fraction of the money needed to clean them up. When they walk away, we — the public — get stuck with the bill and the toxins released into our air, land, and drinking water, harming our health. Some of the most at-risk wells are on or near Tribal and rural communities — but the companies profiting often aren't from here.

Unsealed or improperly sealed wells can allow pollutants to seep into underground and nearby water sources, posing risks to drinking water, local communities and people's health.

The Solution: It's time for common-sense updates that make sure corporations post realistic cleanup bonds before they drill so our communities, land, and drinking water are protected in the long run.

Moral Frame: This is about responsibility. About making sure everyone plays by the same rules and no one gets to profit while leaving others with the bill or mess.

Messaging for Supportive Audiences

Org supporters, allied organizations, supportive decision-makers

Emotion to tap/counter	Sample Message
Outrage	Why should public funds be needed to clean up after billion-dollar oil corporations that take their profits back to Houston and Wall Street and leave us with the mess?

Care	New Mexicans have cared for this land for generations. We can't let toxic, leaking wells poison our families and future.
Pride	New Mexico can lead the way by requiring real accountability and protecting what makes this state special for our families now and for future generations.
Apathy	Your voice matters – when we come together, we can make a difference and ensure our state's rules reflect our values for care for each other and our air, land, water, and wildlife.

Messaging for General Public Audiences

Tone	Sample Message
Pragmatic	This isn't about politics – it's about basic financial sense. The people who drill should be the ones to clean up 100% of the time.
Common sense	You wouldn't let someone rent your house without a deposit. The same should go for drilling in New Mexico.
Fiscally responsible	Cleaning up abandoned wells could cost the public over a billion dollars - dollars that are urgently needed elsewhere. Updating the rules now saves money later.

Sample Message for all audiences

The oil and gas industry should cover the full cost of cleaning up after itself – not New Mexico families.

It's just common sense: if you drill a well, you should clean it up.

We need modern rules that match the reality of modern drilling.

Calls to Action

- Tell the Oil Conservation Commission: If corporations drill it, they must clean it. Support stronger bonding rules to protect New Mexico's health and future.
- Join the campaign to make polluters, not the public, pay for cleanup.
- Speak up for responsible energy policy that protects our land, health, and wallets.

Bonding Modernization By the Numbers

These numbers tell a simple story: we're paying the price for someone else's mess. It's time to fix the rules so the corporations that drill are the ones who clean up.

Measure	Statistic/Insight
New Mexicans support	89% of New Mexicans support requiring oil and gas corporations, rather than the state, to pay for all of the clean-up and land restoration costs after drilling is finished.
Successful Accountability	NM State Land Commissioner Stephanie Garcia Richard's Accountability & Enforcement Program compels corporations to clean up wells they have abandoned by plugging them. As of June 2025, the program has compelled operators to fill/clean up 692 abandoned wells on state trust lands and saved taxpayers at least \$69 million in clean up costs, using a conservative estimate of \$100,000 per well for plugging and surface clean up.
Projected Cleanup Liability	\$700 million to \$1.6 billion in costs for identified unplugged/abandoned wells
Cost per Well	Costs vary widely depending on depth and infrastructure—FY 2024 recorded a range from ~\$31,000 to \$778,000 per well, with an average cost of \$163,000 per well.
Blanket Bond Limits	State law caps required bonding at \$250,000 total per operator—even if they operate thousands of wells.
Wells at Risk	The state's data show there are nearly 700 abandoned oil and gas wells in New Mexico and the New Mexico Oil Conservation Division expects 4,400 to be abandoned soon without adequate corporate funding to plug them.
Public Funds Burden	Public funds have covered the majority of abandoned well plugging over the past five years with \$50 million in state funding and nearly \$50 million in federal funding. The bonding system is vastly inadequate, covering only 2–10% of total liability.

They Say, We Say Matrix

Industry Claim	Public Interest Response
New Mexico is already a national leader in well plugging, with more than 1,700 wells plugged since 2018.	Plugging some wells isn't enough when hundreds more are leaking toxins and threatening our land, water, and health. We're still on the hook for over \$200 million in cleanup. Let's recognize progress and require corporations to finish the job they started.
The LFC report is biased and ignores industry-led efforts.	What the nonpartisan report reveals is simple: public funds are being used to cover cleanup that corporations agreed to handle. This isn't about politics—it's about fairness. If you drill it, you clean it.
Additional regulation will hurt small operators and discourage responsible development.	Size doesn't excuse responsibility. Every operator—large or small—agrees to clean up as part of the deal. If you can't afford to clean it up, you shouldn't drill it in the first place. Rural families can't afford more contaminated wells and polluted groundwater.
Abandoned wells are a legacy issue, not the fault of current operators.	The legacy of abandoned wells is harming current New Mexicans. Blaming the past doesn't solve today's problems. Let's close the loopholes that allow corporations to dodge cleanup by selling to shell companies and walking away.
The industry supports bonding—but changes must be 'balanced.'	Right now, bonds cover 2-10% of cleanup costs—that's not balanced, that's broken. Public funds cover the rest. It's time to update bonding rules to reflect today's real-world cleanup costs.
Plugging costs vary, and operators are improving their practices.	Even as practices improve, costs have soared—to as much as \$778,000 per well. New Mexicans still face air pollution, water threats, and millions in cleanup bills. Better practices must include full accountability.
Government shouldn't interfere too much—let the market lead.	The free market didn't clean up these wells—our communities did. When corporations don't do the right thing, the government must step in to protect people, land, and water. That's not interference—it's responsibility.
This is not the time for burdensome new rules.	There's never a good time to drink dirty water or breathe toxic air. Letting wells leak to protect profits today puts New Mexicans' health at risk tomorrow. We can't afford delay.

We shouldn't be asking for higher levels of accountability from operators until we fix the whole broken well plugging system.	That's exactly backward. A broken system is all the more reason to ensure there's enough financial assurance in place. We cannot afford to underfund risk, especially when the cost of inaction falls on our communities.
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