



(Courtesy Bureau of Land Management) A 45-year-old well on federal land near Salt Wash in Grand County released hundred of barrels of contaminated groundwater after a valve failed Wednesday.

Blowout was firm's second spill from old well near Green River

Environment » Aggressive action chokes off flow, keeps polluted water out of the Green River, but questions remain.

By Brian Maffly | The Salt Lake Tribune
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Cleanup crews on Friday remained at the scene of an oil well failure that sent chemical-laden fluid three miles down a Grand County wash before it was stopped a mile short of the Green River, just upstream from Labyrinth Canyon.

For more than 30 hours Wednesday and Thursday, the well operated by S.W. Energy Corp. released thousands of gallons of water mixed with hydrocarbons as the operator frantically tried to stem the flow and contain the damage with the help of contractors and state and federal agencies.

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The leak is the latest example of how Utah's aging oil and gas fields, often equipped with outdated and failing infrastructure, threaten public lands. In March, hikers discovered [oil coating a wash](#) near a well in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Further searches

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around the Upper Valley oil field found old spills in four other washes and evidence of fresh leaks on the field itself.

A state report on this week's spill suggested S.W. Energy was "ill-equipped" to tackle a big spill, the second associated with its 45-year-old Government Smoot No. 3 well. But the federal [Bureau of Land Management](#) praised the tiny company's prompt reporting and initial response to the crisis.

"The well was blowing out before the operator discovered the spill [Wednesday morning]. It was washing into a dry

wash, a four-mile pathway to the river," said Steve Merrit, an on-scene coordinator with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The fluid was roughly a two-to-one mix of water and oil and officials have little hope of determining exactly how much escaped.

During much of Wednesday, between 80 and 100 barrels an hour poured onto the ground a dozen miles south Green River before a load of special mud sealed the well Thursday afternoon, according to the BLM, which oversees the lease and surrounding lands.

Fidelity Exploration and Production Co., which has been drilling several miles to the south near Dead Horse Point State Park, delivered several truckloads of the high-density mud, weighing 16 pounds a gallon or double the weight of water, which was shoved down the well until it was finally shut in, according to Beth Ransel, BLM's Moab field manager.

Earlier efforts to kill the flow by replacing a failed valve and injecting brine failed.

"Our major priority was to control the flow and achieve full containment. Outstanding cooperation occurred," Ransel said. "Remediation crews are out there working on the cleanup and making sure there is no further migration."

Also responding were the Utah Division of Water Quality and Division of Oil, Gas and Mining.

According to state oil and gas records, the Salt Lake City-based S.W. Energy operates just two Utah wells, both in Grand County's Salt Wash oil field and long past their prime production. The wells date to the 1960s and produced about 9,500 barrels last year, along with an equal amount of water. Phone messages left at the company office on 400 South were not returned Friday.

In 1995, S.W. Energy lost nearly 500 barrels of oil from an on-site storage tank at the same well that leaked this week, according to court records. The oil escaped through a corroded hole in the bottom of the 32-year-old tank and the well was shut in for 40 days while the tank was replaced and the mess cleaned up.

"These kinds of recurring events clearly show this industry cannot be trusted, and it's also indicative of what our future holds for us as long as we have a governor who thinks that dirty energy is Utah's future," said the Sierra Club's Tim Wagner, referring to the Gary Herbert administration's support of petroleum and coal.

The latest spill appears to be the result of a below-grade valve failure. S.W. Energy's wells had been inspected on schedule but such monitoring would not have detected problems with "down-hole issues" such as this suspect valve, according to Ransel.

To contain the spill, a contractor built a series of containment ponds with berms. The fluid overwhelmed the first one, filled the second and traveled three miles down the wash, according to the report posted by the Utah Department of Environmental Quality.

Much of the water percolated into the sand leaving a hydrocarbon residue on the surface. Vacuum trucks sucked up "produced" water backed up behind the berms and moved to Danish Flats Environmental Services, a certified disposal site east of Thompson Springs.

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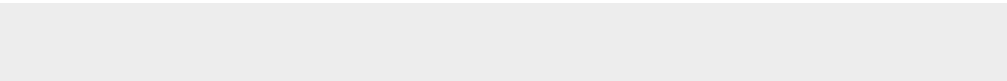
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