UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

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OFFICE OF WATER

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Management and Monitoring Requirements for Class II Wells in Temporary Abandoned Status - Underground Injection Control Program ~~Guidance #78~~

FROM: James R. Elder, Director
Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water (WH-550)

TO: Water Management Division Directors
Regions II - X

BACKGROUND

One of the more longstanding issues associated with the Underground Injection Control (UIC) program concerns the establishment of consistent policy with regard to regulation of temporarily abandoned Class II injection wells. Although all State and Direct Implementation programs recognize both the existence of and need for temporary abandonment of injection wells, policy decisions and procedures for regulating these wells are not consistent from State to State. Definitions, notification requirements, inspection/monitoring activities, and reporting practices vary widely among the UIC programs. The only common characteristics of those wells defined as being "temporarily abandoned" is that injection operations have ceased for some measurable period of time **and** that the wells have not been permanently plugged.

Major concerns, relative to temporarily abandoned wells, raised by the Mid-Course Evaluation workgroup include:

- relaxing of or completely exempting wells from monitoring standards and safeguards that are required of operating injection wells;
- the absence of specific Federal and (in many instances) State regulations that require operators to notify the appropriate regulatory Agency when and under what circumstances a well has been temporarily abandoned;
- the lack of a single common definition or class of

definitions (e.g., "shut-in" versus "temporarily abandoned") stating what constitutes a temporarily abandoned well.

The workgroup recommended that EPA develop a guidance to address these issues. A draft guidance was developed by the UIC Branch and has been reworked by the Class II Advisory Committee chartered on June 6, 1991. This Guidance has been endorsed by the Advisory Committee.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Guidance is to set forth suggested minimum guidelines and procedures to promote a greater degree of consistency and standardization among the UIC programs in the regulation of temporarily abandoned Class II wells. In cases where State regulations are more stringent, then those regulations will take precedence over these guidelines.

Wells can be temporarily abandoned for several reasons. In some cases, they lack mechanical integrity, and it is not cost-effective for the owner/operator to repair them immediately. These wells are discussed in Guidance #76. This guidance only addresses wells which have been temporarily abandoned for other reasons, such as changes in production patterns or cessation of injection into a reservoir for economic reasons.

For the purpose of this guidance, EPA is using the term "temporarily abandoned" to connote a well in which injection will not take place for several months or years. A temporarily abandoned well is different from a "shut-in" well, which connotes an abrupt, short term cessation of injection in response to mechanical integrity failure or other mechanical problems or for the purpose of performing a well workover. EPA recognizes that the various States have different terminologies for "temporarily abandoned" wells. Accordingly, EPA does not believe that it is necessary to use a uniform definition as long as requirements are in place to assure that wells in which injection is not occurring for a prolonged period of time are not endangering underground sources of drinking water (USDWs).

GUIDANCE

Wells can be temporarily abandoned in either of two ways: "as is", that is with all tubular goods, valves, gauges, and other wellhead hardware in place, or the tubing-packer assembly may be pulled, along with some of the wellhead equipment. States may require that wells be temporarily abandoned in one specific way or another. For Direct Implementation programs and in most States, the procedure used to temporarily abandon the well is at

the operator's discretion.

1. For wells temporarily abandoned in an "as is" condition, the owner/operator should continue monitoring and testing of the wells as required in his permit. This would include monitoring of annulus pressure (if required), injection pressure and flow rate ("zeros" on the reporting forms would allow the UIC Director to ascertain the TA status of the well). In addition, the operator must perform mechanical integrity tests as required by the permits [40 CFR 144.28 (c)(2)(iv)(B)].

2. Where the operator chooses to change the configuration of the well during TA status, such changes must be approved by the UIC Director. If the changes make it unfeasible to continue the monitoring and testing procedures prescribed in the permit, the UIC Director should establish alternative monitoring and testing requirements.

Financial responsibility demonstration updates as required by UIC Program Guidance #65 (Guidance for Financial Responsibility in Federally-Administered UIC Class II Programs, March 29, 1989) must also be made for these wells. This is particularly important if production from the particular field or reservoir, in which the well is located, is not taking place presently and will not take place in the foreseeable future. It is important to ascertain that the owner/operator has other assets or means to properly plug and abandon the well in the event injection operations are not resumed.

All monitoring and testing programs should remain in force until such time as the wells are either put back in service or properly plugged and abandoned. The operators are required to notify the Director **prior to** returning a well to active injection status [40 CFR 144.28 (c)(2)(v)]. Where putting the wells back into service includes major changes to the well configuration (e.g., running the tubing and packer assembly back into the well) the operator must demonstrate mechanical integrity before injection operations can resume.

GUIDANCE IMPLEMENTATION

This document provides guidance to both primacy State and direct implementation UIC Directors on procedures to be followed with respect to Class II wells placed into temporarily abandoned status. The guidance is a general statement of policy. It does not establish or affect legal rights or obligations. It is not finally determinative of any or all of the issues addressed.

Agency decisions in any particular case will be made on the basis of specific facts and actions required to prohibit endangerment of USDWs.

Regional and State UIC program Directors are requested to take all appropriate action to incorporate this guidance into their programs. Implementation of the recommendations of this guidance will be discussed as part of the FY 1992 evaluation of State and Regional programs.

Questions and comments on this guidance should be addressed to Françoise Brasier, Chief of the UIC Branch at (202) 260-7077 or Jeff Smith of her staff at (202) 260-5586.