



STORIES OF PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING HEALTHY WATERS

EPA Region 3 Water Protection Division

U.S., Pennsylvania Collaborate on Well-Plugging Case to Protect Drinking Water

Elk County, Pennsylvania · April 2, 2015

A case that led to prison and fines for an operator who improperly plugged old oil wells in the Allegheny Forest in Elk County, Pennsylvania, began when EPA's Dave Rectenwald noticed something amiss.

Rectenwald is an inspector with the [Underground Injection Control \(UIC\) Program](#) in the Ground Water and Enforcement Branch of EPA's Mid-Atlantic Water Protection Division.

He was monitoring a routine test to ensure the integrity of a well that would be injected with fluids at high pressure to get new production from a nearby oil well. When fluid began to appear at the surface of the "injection well," it was clear there was a problem.

The fluid was coming from an abandoned oil well 200 feet away that had not been properly plugged in 2008. After the discovery, the well was re-plugged to the proper depth with layers of cement and a clay-like gel – adhering to state and UIC requirements designed to prevent contamination of underground sources of drinking water. When the scenario played out again at a well plugged by the same operator, Ronald Wright of S&T Services and Supply, Inc., Rectenwald and his boss, Karen Johnson, contacted EPA's Mid-Atlantic Criminal Investigation Division (CID).

CID Special Agent Jennifer Jackson worked with the U.S. Forest Service and the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office to pursue the matter - interviewing the S&T owner, Wright's co-workers and finally Wright himself.

S&T had also agreed to sample 10 of the 95 wells in the Allegheny Forest that Wright had plugged to see if there was a pattern. There was. Eight of the 10 had not been plugged correctly – some only half way to the required bottom – despite certification from Wright that they had been.

In December 2014, Wright was sentenced to serve six months in federal prison and pay \$236,000 restitution for falsifying Pennsylvania Oil Well Plugging Certificates. He was also ordered to serve three years supervised release, including 12 months house arrest. All 95 of the Wright-plugged wells are being re-opened, cleaned out, and re-plugged by S&T at the company's expense. Each well can take a week to a month to re-do.

Officials said that criminal enforcement in this matter played a key role in protecting underground sources of drinking water and will serve as a deterrent to others considering cutting corners. "It sends a message," said Special Agent Jackson. "When plugging wells, drinking water is a serious issue. Do your part and follow the rules."



AT A GLANCE

- EPA, Forest Service, PA worked together to ensure the safety of drinking water.
- Operator served with fines, prison term.



U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
EPA Region 3 Water Protection Division
Philadelphia, PA

For additional information contact:

Dave Rectenwald, rectenwald.dave@epa.gov
EPA Region 3 GW Enforcement;
Jennifer Jackson, Jackson.jennifer@epa.gov
EPA CID