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Chevron settles Texas 'zombie' well case, sidestepping trial that threatened industry



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Well testing on Antina Ranch property.
Elizabeth Conley

By **Amanda Drane**, Staff Writer

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The legal fight that gave name to “zombie wells” in Texas is winding to a close as Chevron finalizes a settlement out of court with the owner of Antina Ranch.

Had it gone to trial next month, the rare litigation between a wealthy rancher and a Houston oil giant would have offered unprecedented detail into the damage caused by leaking wells on the sprawling 22,000-acre ranch in West Texas.



Scientists take samples of produced water from a crumbling former oil well on Antina Ranch in West Texas on Wednesday, March 6, 2024.

A courtroom win for landowner Ashley Watt could have paved a new legal path for landowners whose properties were polluted by decades-old leaking wells.

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It also could have made Chevron and other big oil companies responsible for problems created by thousands of wells drilled and plugged decades ago in ways that haven't withstood the test of time. The largest oil companies have acquired vast numbers of these old wells as they have gobbled up smaller companies.

UNDEAD OIL WELLS: A toxic geyser blew sky-high in West Texas. New rules that followed wouldn't stop the next one.



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The Antina team sought to prove scores of old oil wells on Watt's beloved family ranch in Crane and Ward counties were failing at an alarming rate. It challenged a long-held assumption that a plugged well stays plugged, permanently protecting the groundwater it cuts through from the toxic fluids often found deeper underground.

"If this had gone to trial and (Watt) had won any relief, then it is a potential threat to everybody who has responsibility for the condition of legacy assets," said Chrysta Castañeda, an energy attorney based in Dallas.

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A courtroom win for landowner Ashley Watt could have paved a new legal path for landowners whose properties were polluted by decades-old leaking wells. It also could have made Chevron and other big oil companies responsible for problems created by thousands of wells drilled and plugged decades ago in ways that haven't withstood the test of time.

But even without the trial, some say Watt had a lasting impact on the problem.

The settlement's terms may not be public, but the fact that it exists is enough to encourage other landowners and their attorneys to "take their shot," said Ben Segal, attorney with the environmental firm ClientEarth.

Chevron's costs "would be enormous" if more landowners expected the company to dig up and re-plug its legacy wells, Segal said. He said Chevron's willingness to settle suggests Watt had gathered enough evidence to pose a broader threat.

“It probably reflects the fact that the company wanted to cut its losses before it had to publicly admit that its old plugged wells are such an issue, and may be such an issue in other places,” Segal said.

Chevron didn't answer questions from the Chronicle. It said in a statement Friday that the case was resolved “subject to a mutually agreed confidential settlement.”

Even absent a trial, Cole Ruiz, a groundwater attorney based in Austin, said Watt's case against Chevron has already attracted needed attention to the issue.

“I think it's a win anyway,” Ruiz said. “Oil and gas degradation has been the elephant in the room for a very long time that nobody wanted to acknowledge. And so I think now we're acknowledging it.”

‘Clean up the ranch’

Watt, who couldn't be reached for comment, said during earlier interviews that she was inspired to pursue the case after the first well on her property, Estes 24, started spewing toxic water in June 2021. She said she asked Chevron to “clean up the ranch.” Chevron had acquired many of the wells on the ranch when it bought Gulf Oil in 1984.

But Chevron resisted, she said.

“What I didn't realize is cleaning this up is their worst nightmare because if the precedent is they have to clean up this mess each time,” Watt said, “they're bankrupt.”

Thousands of decades-old wells drilled by Gulf Oil, an oil giant of its time, dot the Texas landscape and Gulf Coast regions. Fixing even just one of these old wells can become a multimillion-dollar endeavor, depending on whether it is leaking and how deteriorated the well has become.

Onshore wells typically cost about \$30,000 to plug, yet the Texas Railroad Commission has paid more than 10 times that amount to plug wells that are gushing with contaminated water.

But leaking wells aren't always geysers and gushers. Sometimes leaks lurk beneath the surface, where they can affect groundwater. That's why Watt hired a team of experts tasked with documenting the extent of the ranch's leaking well problem.





A team of scientists collected samples at Antina Ranch. Samples from inside and outside the well would help answer the question at issue in the trial: How many of these wells were leaking and what damage were they wreaking?

In March 2024, that team of experts set to work excavating a 1960s-era oil well at Antina Ranch. A welding crew cut into the top of the well. Opposing teams of scientists waited quietly to collect samples to inform their cases in court.

Off came the well's top, revealing filmy black water where cement should have been.

"It's like Christmas," said Hawk Dunlap, a well control specialist and a member of the Antina Ranch crew who is now running for a seat on the Railroad Commission.

'ZOMBIES' ABOUND: Hundreds of 'zombie' wells likely plague a single Texas county, University of Houston study finds

Chevron employees watched silently.

Hydrogeologist Raymond Straub, collecting samples for Antina, used a long plastic tube to sample the water. Dunlap used a sledgehammer to break off bits of cement lining the well. He tossed a chunk up, out of the pit to Straub. He handed a second chunk to Chevron's team of scientists.

The day's excavation was one of more than 100 done in preparation for the trial that was scheduled to take place in January 2026. Watt spent thousands of dollars on each excavation, amounting to millions of dollars over the years since she filed the original lawsuit in 2022.

Even though Watt settled, Dunlap doesn't think the battle is over.

"Antina ranch was a starting point," said Dunlap, who, through his work at Antina, has become the unofficial spokesman for the "zombie" well phenomenon.

“We’ve barely scratched the surface on the totality of the problems across the state.”

Dec 9, 2025



Amanda Drane

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER, ENERGY



Amanda Drane is an investigative reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

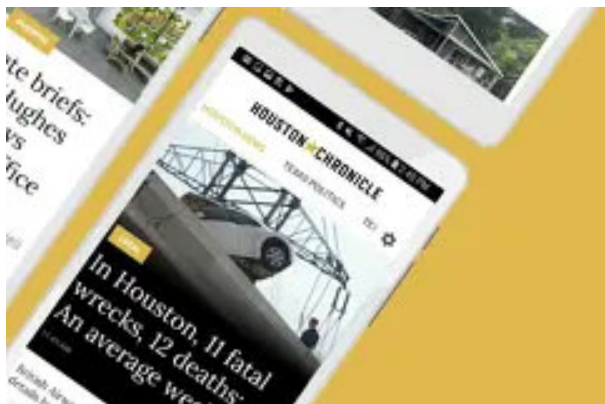
Amanda’s work on so-called “zombie wells” – long-dead oil and gas wells bursting with toxic water – received top honors in the Texas Managing Editors awards and helped inform a growing movement to reform how Houston’s oil and gas industry is regulated.

Her coverage has probed links between oil and gas industry wastewater – believed to be traveling underground – and water blowouts and earthquakes. Amanda also writes about the human impacts of the industry, from big oil trends impacting jobs at companies like Exxon and Chevron, to safety issues with human consequences.

Coverage that Amanda contributed to won national and local awards in 2025. A project highlighting lax enforcement of poisonous gas leaking from oil and gas wells won top honors from the Society for Advancing Business Editing and Writing and was a semifinalist for the 2025 Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting. “Powerless,” the Chronicle’s package of stories that dug into how CenterPoint kept millions in the dark in the wake of Hurricane Beryl, was also a Goldsmith semifinalist and was recognized by The Headliners Foundation.

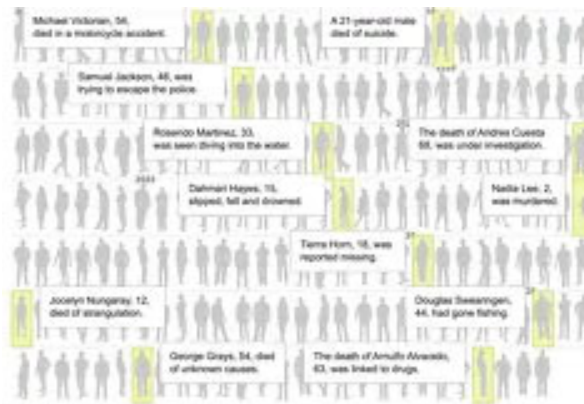
She enjoys yoga, strength training and eating well, thanks to her chef-husband.

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