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Texas spent \$7M to plug a toxic well. Now it's demanding a Houston company foot the bill.

By **Amanda Drane**, Staff Writer

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The “large amount of water” coming from the Ward County well required costly containment pits and trucks to haul the water away, the Railroad Commission said in a statement at the time.

The Texas Railroad Commission spent an eye-popping \$6.95 million to plug a Ward County well bursting with toxic water in September 2024.

It was a price tag so hefty — roughly 230 times the amount needed to plug the average well — that it became a symbol of the financial pressure facing the commission as it struggles to contain decades-old leaking wells.

Now, the commission is trying to recoup those funds from a prominent Houston wastewater disposal operator it says was responsible for the blowout. WaterBridge, which went public last year in a high-profile initial offering, denies it was to blame and aims to dispute the findings in a hearing.

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The legal battle to come is a test for both the commission and the oil and gas industry it regulates, as tension builds over who should be held accountable for a rash of leaking wells in Texas.

“This case is unprecedented,” attorneys for WaterBridge wrote in response to the commission’s enforcement proceedings.



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SEARCH THE MAP: Texas has 500 potential ‘zombie’ wells. This map shows where they are most likely to pollute.

The case is unusual because WaterBridge’s disposal well was properly permitted and operating within the confines of those permits, the company said. And yet the commission is holding WaterBridge responsible for a blowout that occurred a half-mile away at a 1950s-era well that was not plugged by modern standards.

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Hundreds of thousands of decades-old wells dot the Texas landscape — mile-deep holes that can provide a pathway for the industry’s wastewater to rise to the surface and contaminate groundwater along the way. A Houston Chronicle analysis recently identified 2,700 Texas wells at high risk of leaking.

WaterBridge said the commission failed to prove that its wastewater was the fluid coming from the blowout well in Ward County and that it had contaminated groundwater. It also dismissed the commission's use of pressure data to link its disposal well with the flowing well. It pointed to three other disposal wells within a two-mile radius that could have triggered the event.

WaterBridge’s disposal well is no longer operational after the commission canceled its permit shortly following the incident. A hearing on the matter has not yet been scheduled.

A spokesman for the commission declined to comment, noting it doesn’t comment on pending cases. The commission’s evidence in the case has not yet been made public.

The state’s leaking well problem has no easy fix. Oil companies are running out of safe places to put their wastewater. The Permian Basin is one of the most productive oil regions in the world, but it actually yields far more dirty water than oil — on average, roughly three barrels of water come up with every barrel of oil. That’s because the fracking process frees up vast amounts of benzene-laced brine trapped for thousands of years alongside oil and natural gas in shale rock.

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Workers clean up a well site on Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2024, in Barstow, Texas.

Elizabeth Conley/Staff Photographer

Disposing of the water in deep-seated formations causes earthquakes, regulators and scientists say. But injecting it instead in shallow formations can push toxic water into old wells and other leak points, threatening groundwater.

The problem is also a business opportunity for companies like WaterBridge, which operates the largest network of wastewater pipelines and processing facilities in the

U.S. The Houston-based company operates roughly 2,500 miles of pipelines and 197 wastewater handling facilities, processing over 2.6 million barrels per day, many of which are in Texas, it said in a September filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

WaterBridge injects wastewater underground on behalf of some of the largest oil companies, including Chevron, BP, Devon Energy, Permian Resources and EOG Resources.

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The company's CEO Jason Long's salary is also among the highest in Houston, with an annual compensation package worth nearly \$25 million, according to data from 2024.

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Amanda Drane is an investigative reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

Her work covering leaking oil and gas wells has won national recognition, including a first-place award for excellence in science reporting from the Online News Association in 2025.