OPINION // OUTLOOK

Oil and gas companies want to dump treated wastewater into Texas rivers. But they haven't proven it's safe. | Opinion

By **Luke Metzger**
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The Guadalupe River, as seen at Guadalupe State Park.
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Texas' oil boom has created a massive pollution problem: nearly 1 billion gallons of produced water every day.

For every barrel of oil pulled from the Permian Basin in west Texas, polluted water comes up with it. Known as "produced water," this waste can contain salts, hydrocarbons, heavy metals, naturally occurring radioactive materials, and chemicals used in oil and gas production.

For years, the industry's primary solution has been to inject much of that wastewater deep underground. But that solution is running into serious limits.

The Permian is running out of underground disposal capacity. The Railroad Commission has acknowledged the "physical limitations" of disposal reservoirs and has imposed new restrictions on injection.

Injecting such enormous quantities of wastewater is causing other problems. Scientists have linked large-scale wastewater injection to earthquakes and even oil well blowouts. A 2024 Southern Methodist University study found that in one case, injected wastewater traveled through geological faults — fractures in the Earth's crust — for 12 miles before reaching an abandoned oil well and then erupting to the surface. The resulting 2022 blowout released nearly 15 million gallons of brine before it was capped.

The Railroad Commission responded to such problems by prohibiting wastewater injection in some areas of Texas. Now, oil industry representatives warn that Texas is running out of places to put this waste, and that without new disposal options, oil production could be constrained.

That warning should raise the question: How much oil can Texas responsibly produce if we can't safely dispose of the waste? Is producing less oil the better, safer, healthier option?

Texas regulators are now considering a new disposal option: treating produced water to remove known contaminants and releasing it into our rivers and streams.

Recycling produced water for additional oil and gas operations can reduce the industry's demand for fresh water to use during fracking. Researchers should continue studying whether highly treated, produced water can safely be reused for certain industrial or other controlled purposes.

But discharging it into Texas waterways is a different proposition entirely.

Releasing wastewater into a river or stream is risky. Contaminants that escape treatment could move downstream, enter aquatic ecosystems and threaten water supplies. Scientists are still studying what pollutants are found in produced water, and how effective different treatment technologies are at removing contaminants. Right now, it's unclear whether treated water can be safely released into the environment.

Texas should confidently have the answer to those questions before issuing permits to oil companies, not afterward.

That includes identifying the full range of contaminants that could pose risks to human health and ecosystems, setting strong pollution limits and demonstrating that treatment works reliably at commercial scale.

The burden should be on the companies seeking to discharge this wastewater to prove it is safe, not on Texans downstream to prove their river has been harmed.

There's a larger question here, too. For years, Texas communities and our environment have borne the costs of the oil boom, from air pollution to earthquakes and oil-well blowouts. Now, faced with the limits of underground disposal, the industry wants another outlet for its enormous waste stream: our land and rivers. And Texas regulators are laying the groundwork to let them.

At what point do the risks to our water, land and public health become too high a price to pay for maintaining ever-higher levels of oil production?

If we can't safely dispose of the enormous quantities of wastewater we're producing, perhaps the answer isn't to weaken standards or rush approval of a new disposal method. Perhaps the industry simply has to produce less.

That may sound radical in Texas, but is assuring clean, safe water really radical? It shouldn't be.

Texans face enormous water challenges in the decades ahead. Our population is growing, many aquifers are under stress, and taxpayers are being asked to spend billions of dollars to develop new water supplies and repair aging infrastructure.

Our rivers, streams and groundwater are too valuable to become a dumping ground for the oil industry's growing waste problem.

Innovation may eventually give us safe new ways to treat and reuse produced water, and we should welcome rigorous research that can demonstrate that.

Until then, Texas environmental regulators should remember their job: protecting our water and natural resources, not finding somewhere new for industry to put its waste.

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