

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

**WELL DECOMMISSIONING**

(No.)  
CODE 351

**DEFINITION**

The sealing and permanent closure of a water well no longer in use.

**PURPOSE**

- Prevent entry of animals, debris, or other foreign substances into a well or well bore hole;
- Eliminate the physical hazard of an open hole to people, animals, and farm machinery;
- Prevent entry of contaminated surface water into a well and migration of contaminants into the unsaturated (vadose) zone or saturated zone;
- Prevent commingling of chemically or physically different ground waters between separate water bearing zones;
- Eliminate possibility of a well being used for any other purpose;
- Conserve yield and hydrostatic head of aquifers;
- Restore, as far as feasible, hydrogeologic conditions that existed before a well was constructed.

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

This practice applies to any drilled, dug, driven, bored, or otherwise constructed vertical water well determined to have no further beneficial use.

This practice does not apply to water wells that were used for waste disposal.

**CRITERIA**

Wells shall be decommissioned in a manner that meets all applicable local, state, federal, and tribal laws and regulations.

In California, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) has responsibility for developing standards for wells for the protection of water quality under California Water Code Section 231. All counties,

and water agencies have adopted well standards that equal or exceed DWR standards.

DWR Well Standards (Bulletins 74-81 and 74-90) are online at [http://www.dpla.water.ca.gov/sd/groundwater/california\\_well\\_standards/well\\_standards.html](http://www.dpla.water.ca.gov/sd/groundwater/california_well_standards/well_standards.html). Part III of the DWR Water Well and Monitoring Well Standards specifically addresses destruction of wells.

Criteria for all purposes shall conform to decommissioning procedures presented in ASTM D5299, "Standard Guide for Decommissioning of Ground Water Wells, Vadose Zone Monitoring Devices, Boreholes, and Other Devices for Environmental Activities."

**Data collection.** As-built construction documents, maintenance records and other available data for the abandoned water well shall be collected, reviewed and applied toward the development of a well decommissioning plan. Existing conditions shall be documented as defined in Plans and Specifications.

**Well preparation.** To the extent possible, the well shall be cleared of all pumping equipment, valves, pipelines, casings, liners, screens, grease, oil, scum, debris, and other foreign material as explained in ASTM D5299, part 7.3.8.

**Disinfection.** Before sealing, the entire column of well water shall be brought to an available chlorine concentration of 50 ppm or greater, or other solution specified by local or state requirements. After being agitated in the well water, the chemical solution shall be left for no less than 24 hours to assure complete disinfection. Additional criteria and guidelines are presented in F.G. Driscoll's Groundwater and Wells (1986), pp. 620-623.

**Sealing materials.** Properties of sealing materials shall conform to characteristics listed in ASTM D5299, part 6.3. Acceptable sealing materials are provided in ASTM D5299, part 6.4. Sealing materials do not require disinfection.

Water to be mixed with grout shall be compatible with the grouting material, and shall be of a quality

that conforms to criteria provided in ASTM D5299, part 7.3.3.

**Fill material.** If allowed by local regulations, fill materials, such as sand, pea gravel, sand-gravel mix, crushed stone, or agricultural lime can be used to plug the well provided that zones of sealing material conform to ASTM D5299, part 6.3.

Fill material shall be clean and free of organic or other foreign matter. The gradation shall be such that bridging will not occur during placement.

**Placement of material.** Sealing and fill material shall be placed into the well only after the well water has been disinfected. Sealing material is placed at a minimum thickness of one foot starting at the top of the lowest water bearing zone and successively placed at intervals (alternating with zones of fill material) every 10 feet or less throughout the entire well column. In areas where the interchange of water between aquifers will result in a significant deterioration of the quality of water in one or more aquifers, or will result in a loss of artesian pressure, the well shall be filled and sealed so as to prevent such interchange.

All material shall be placed from the bottom of the well upward by methods that avoid segregation, dilution, or bridging of the material.

For wells greater than 30 inches in diameter, backfill shall be placed and compacted in a manner that minimizes segregation and bulking to prevent surface subsidence.

**Removal of well casing.** If possible, the casing shall be completely removed from the well by either pulling or overdrilling (overreaming) as explained in ASTM D5299, part 7.3.1. Casing that cannot be removed completely shall be ripped, perforated, or cut off at a depth greater than the maximum potential for frost penetration or any other near surface soil fracturing hazard (such as desiccation), or five feet, whichever is greater.

**Casings grouted in place.** Casings to be grouted in place shall employ a pressurized grouting procedure that will completely fill and seal the open space around the casing.

Perforated or ripped casing shall provide sufficient apportioned open area to assure passage of the grout into the space. The casing shall be perforated or ripped throughout the entire length of a confining layer.

Casings to be removed from a collapsing formation shall be grouted concurrently with removal such that the bottom of the casing remains submerged in the grout.

**Surface seal.** The interval between the ground surface and the top of cut off casing shall be sealed with sealing materials that conform to ASTM D5299, part 6.3. These materials may be an extension of the sealing materials used below this depth.

The interval between the ground surface and the top of the cut off casing shall be filled with soil material that achieves an in-place hydraulic conductivity equivalent to or less than the surface soil surrounding the well. The ground surface at the sealed well site shall be mounded and graded in a manner that prevents ponding of surface runoff.

**Control of elevated formation pressure.** If a well penetrates a formation that is under artesian head (confined conditions), or from which a gas is being released under pressure, the grout pressure must be maintained greater than the formation pressure until initial grout set occurs. Procedures for balancing formation pressures during grouting operations shall conform to ASTM D5299, part 7.3.7.

## CONSIDERATIONS

This practice may be part of a ground water protection system that includes water and chemical management practices.

To the extent practicable, an abandoned well should be decommissioned in a manner that restores the original hydrogeologic conditions of the well site and does not preclude the use of the site from future land management practices.

All decommissioning procedures and fill and sealing materials need to be selected with due consideration of the site-specific geological, biological, physical and climatic conditions, the chemical composition of the surrounding soil, rock and ground water at the well site, and the well's construction practices.

### Cultural Resource Considerations

NRCS' objective is to avoid any effect to cultural resources and protect them in their original location. Determine if installation of this practice will have any effect on any cultural resources.

Document any specific considerations for cultural resources in the design docket and the Practice Requirements Worksheet.

GM 420, Part 401, the California Environmental Handbook and the California Environmental Assessment Worksheet provide guidance on how the NRCS must account for cultural resources. The Field Office Technical Guide, Section II contains general information, with internet sites for additional information.

### **Endangered Species Considerations**

Determine if installation of this practice with any others proposed will have any effect on any federal or state listed Rare, Threatened, or Endangered species or their habitat. NRCS' objective is to benefit these species and others of concern, or at least not have any adverse effect on a listed species. If the Environmental Evaluation indicated the action may adversely affect a listed species or result in adverse modification of habitat of listed species which has been determined to be critical habitat, NRCS will advise the land user of the requirements of the Endangered Species Act and recommend alternative conservation treatments for installation; or at the request of the landowners, the NRCS may initiate consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA Fisheries (National Marine Fisheries Service), and/or California Department of Fish and Game. If the Environmental Evaluation indicates the action will not affect a listed species or result in adverse modification of critical habitat, consultation generally will not apply and usually would not be initiated. Document any special considerations for endangered species in the Practice Requirements Worksheet.

### **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Plans and specifications for decommissioning abandoned water wells shall be consistent with this standard and shall describe the requirements for applying the practice to achieve its intended purposes. A record of the installation of this practice shall be made and shall include the following information:

- Location of the decommissioned well by latitude/longitude, township/range, or other georeference convention, of such precision that it can be readily located in the field, if required, in the future
- Date of completion of well decommissioning
- Name of landowner

- Name, title, and address of person responsible for well decommissioning
- Total depth of well
- Length of casing
- Length of casing removed or length of casing cut off below ground level
- Inside diameter of well bore or casing
- Type of casing material or schedule (e.g., standard weight steel, or PVC sch-80)
- Static water level measured from ground surface prior to decommissioning
- Types of materials used for filling and sealing, quantities used, depth intervals for emplacement of each type, and emplacement method used.

This information can be completed on forms provided by the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). The completed report/forms shall be submitted to DWR in accordance with relevant provisions of Section 13750 through 13754 of the California Water Code. Information about DWR Well Completion Reports and blank forms are available at [http://www.groundwater.water.ca.gov/technical\\_assistance/gw\\_wells/gww\\_comprept/index.cfm](http://www.groundwater.water.ca.gov/technical_assistance/gw_wells/gww_comprept/index.cfm)

### **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

The practice site shall be inspected periodically to ensure that the decommissioned well and the adjacent area have not settled or eroded, or are otherwise adversely disturbed. The well site and adjacent ground surfaces shall be maintained in a manner that prevents ponding of surface runoff on the site.