

# Brine Well Collapses



According to the New Mexico legislature, beginning in the early 1980s and for decades after the State Oil Conservation Division began routinely approving brine well applications to support oil and gas exploration in Lea and Eddy Counties. OCD reports that since 2008, “three large sinkholes associated with brine wells in the Permian Basin have catastrophically developed; two in New Mexico, and one in Texas.” (emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>

While not yet collapsed, one urban-area brine well in Carlsbad was found to have a “high likelihood” of collapse within the next 5 years, exposing a hole more than 1,000-feet wide, 1,700-feet deep and as far as 600 feet down. The collapse zone includes the intersection of two major state highways, a church, a BNSF railroad facility, a major Carlsbad Irrigation District Canal, and a residential mobile home park.

OCD reports that it has spent more than \$5 million to monitor the site, including the installation of early warning systems for nearby residents and emergency drills for first responders. Remedy and reclamation cost estimates exceed \$25 million and rise every year. Those costs do not include the economic loss to transportation, irrigation and farming, or the loss of homes.

After learning of the risk, the company operating the well entered bankruptcy, leaving the state’s taxpayers with the burden of remediation<sup>1</sup>.

## 2008-ONGOING COST: \$30+ MILLION

OCDs brine well application regulations (currently OCD’s brine well application regulations (currently suspended due to the collapses) note that OCD conducts an environmental review, but there are no requirements for what is studied or what is permitted.<sup>1</sup> But regulation of this type of activity occurs through a web of interconnected agencies, none of which appears to be required to act as a lead agency to conduct a comprehensive environmental impact review<sup>1</sup>.

According to OCD’s own brine well regulations, Sec. 2, **Environmental Information and Education Programs**, “To date, OCD has not developed a specific public information or education program.”

Conducting a comprehensive environmental review may have identified the danger to nearby homes and critical infrastructure, as well as the type of geology that would lend this area to

<sup>1</sup><http://www.emnrd.state.nm.us/OCD/brinewellinfo.html>

<sup>2</sup>Source: NMLEG, SB3 (2017). FIR:

<https://www.nmlegis.gov/Sessions/17%20Regular/firs/SB0003.PDF>