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Public Health
Seattle & King County

MEMORANDUM

September 10. 2026

To: Property Owners, On-site Sewage System Designers, and Well Drillers

From: Lynn Schneider, On-site Sewage System Program Supervisor

RE: Transition from Potable Water Well to Irrigation Well - Public Health's Policy

The purpose of this memo is to establish policy and procedures for evaluating whether property owners may keep existing drinking water or other wells with the intent of using them for irrigation purposes after drilling a replacement well or connecting to an approved Group A or Group B water system. Because King County Code and King County Board of Health code does not specifically address this issue, we are seeking to establish a clear, consistent decision-making process.

Public Health – Seattle & King County does not accept applications for new irrigation well construction. However, the King County On-Site Sewage System Program does accept applications for new and replacement wells that are to be used as a domestic water supply. Further, the King County On-Site Sewage System Program sometimes reviews applications involving a home going from using an individual/private well to an approved public water system. As such, King County Health Inspectors may be confronted with scenarios involving wells that are no longer needed as the domestic water supply. Considering wells act as a conduit between the surface and groundwater aquifers and may become an environmental contamination and safety hazard, the King County On-Site Sewage System Permitting Program is often the only King County department that addresses the public health concerns surrounding unused or abandoned wells while processing applications.

Definitions

"Abandoned Well" means a well that is unmaintained, no longer being used, or is in such disrepair that it is unusable or is a risk to public health and welfare. *WAC 173-160-111 (1)*

"Aquifer" is a geologic formation, group of formations, or part of a formation capable of yielding a significant amount of groundwater to wells or springs. *WAC 173-160-111 (4)*

"Contamination" means alteration of the physical, chemical or biological properties, of any waters of the state, including change in temperature, taste, color, turbidity, or odor of the waters, or such discharge of any liquid, gaseous, solid, radioactive, or other substance into any waters of the state as will or is likely to create a nuisance or render such waters harmful, detrimental or injurious to the public health, safety or welfare, or to domestic, commercial,

industrial, agricultural, recreational, or other legitimate beneficial uses, or to livestock, wild animals, birds, fish or other aquatic life. *RCW 90.48.020*

"Decommissioning" means to fill or plug a well so that it will not produce water, serve as a channel for movement of water or pollution, or allow the entry of pollutants into the well or aquifer(s). *WAC 176-160-111 (18)*

"Domestic water supply" is any water supply which serves a family residence(s).
WAC 176-160-111 (24)

"Well" means any excavation that is constructed when the intended use of the well is for the location, diversion, artificial recharge, observation, monitoring, dewatering or withdrawal of groundwater for agricultural, municipal, industrial, domestic, or commercial use.
WAC 176-160-111 (60)

Key Considerations:

1. **Water Quality Risks**
    - Wells may be a contamination risk due to damaged, inadequate, and aging well construction, outdated construction standards, and lack of maintenance.
    - Wells with inadequate setbacks, damaged or insufficient surface seals, unprotected wellhead openings, or damaged casings, increase the risk of contaminating an aquifer.
2. **Decommissioning Standards Protect Aquifers**
    - **WAC 173-160** requires any well which is unusable, abandoned, or whose use has been permanently discontinued, or which is in such disrepair that its continued use is impractical or is an environmental, safety or public health hazard **shall** be decommissioned.
    - When an individual/private well needs to be replaced, it is often because there is some sort of deficiency with the existing well.
3. **Groundwater Sustainability**
    - Multiple wells on a single property may increase concentrated water extraction, potentially straining aquifers and disrupting groundwater-surface water interrelationships and instream flows.
4. **Economic Considerations for Property Owners**
    - Property owners may wish to retain their old well for irrigation purposes to save on well decommissioning and/or drilling a new irrigation well.
5. **Regulatory Oversight**
    - As a local health department, Public Health – Seattle & King County is required to regulate abandoned wells in consideration of both local and state codes.

- We will be evaluating the request to use a well for irrigation in the consideration of WAC 173-160-381, WAC 246-272A, King County Board of Health Title 13, the King County Comprehensive Plan, and other local codes.

Default Policy - Decommission Old Wells

Per **WAC 173-160-381** the decommissioning of a well is required when "any well which [has become] unusable, abandoned, or whose use has been permanently discontinued, or which is in such disrepair that its continued use is impractical or is an environmental, safety or public health hazard…". According to **WAC 172-160-111** an abandoned well "means a well that is unmaintained or is in such disrepair that it is unusable or is a risk to public health and welfare". **If the well does not meet these criteria, then the well may continue being used for irrigation purposes only per the requirements below.**

When the King County On-Site Sewage Program reviews applications involving a replacement well or applications in which a home using a septic system is going from using a private well to using a public water system, the default expectation is that the preexisting well be decommissioned **before on-site sewage system site design approval**. Properly decommissioned wells may not be closer than 10 feet away from a drainfield. The preexisting well shall be decommissioned due to its capability of being a conduit for contamination and it may be presumed that the well is experiencing a defect leading to the decision of replacing the well or connecting to an approved public water system. Receiving a Department of Ecology Decommissioning Report before granting final approval for an application involving a replacement well or new connection to a public water system is the standard practice for King County's septic system program.

Policy Justification:

- **WAC 173-160-381:**
  - *"Any well which is unusable, abandoned, or whose use has been permanently discontinued, or which is in such disrepair that its continued use is impractical or is an environmental, safety, or public health hazard shall be decommissioned."*
- **Comprehensive Plan Policy F-241:**
  - *"King County shall encourage the adoption of state or local laws and codes to limit the construction of new permit exempt wells within existing water utility service area and promote the safe and timely decommissioning of well no longer in service."*
- **King County Comprehensive Plan Narrative (Services, Facilities and Utilities – Page 9-17 and Page 9-18):**
  - *"The State Department of Ecology has determined that the rivers and streams in the major river basins in King County have no water available for further consumptive appropriation without harmfully impacting instream values. For*

that reason, it has by regulation closed those basins to issuance of new water rights, and has directed that the natural interrelationships between surface and ground waters should be considered in future water allocation decisions in order to avoid adverse impacts to instream flows. The installation and use of wells that are exempt from ecology's water rights permitting process may further harm those rivers and streams when the wells are withdrawing groundwater that is directly connected to the water in the stream. The installation of new exempt wells may also create health and safety problems by interfering with the water supplied by existing wells, and by creating more holes in the ground that can lead to contamination of entire aquifers."

- **King County Code Title 21A.24.316 (E):**
    - *"In any critical aquifer recharge area, the property owner shall properly decommission an abandoned well*."

<u>Criteria to Continue Using a Well for Irrigation Purposes Only:</u>
The standard practice for the King County On-Site Sewage System program when processing applications involving a well replacement or when a private well user is connecting to a public water system, the preexisting water source must be decommissioned **before receiving final replacement well source site application approval or final septic system site design approval.** The preexisting water source may be kept for irrigation purposes to irrigate up to ½ acre (unless otherwise specified by an Ecology Water Right Certificate) in special case-by-case situations only. It is the responsibility of the applicant to provide the following as a condition for retaining their well:

1. **Written Statement of Intent:**
    - The property owner or applicant must submit a written statement about the well's intended use as an irrigation well, describe why it is not a contamination hazard, how cross-connection will be prevented, and how the irrigation well will be maintained.

2. **Satisfactory Well Type and Condition:**
    - The well must be a drilled well (dug wells and springs are not acceptable for Public Health to review).
        i. Dug wells, and springs with Ecology water rights will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
    - The well must be functional and in good repair, with electricity and pump installed, along with storage tanks as needed to meet functional flow.
    - Wells located inside garages, barns, storage buildings or dwellings are **NOT** allowed to be converted to irrigation and must be properly decommissioned.

3. **Well Construction Standards:**
    - Must specifically demonstrate the well casing extends 6" above grade
    - The wellhead must be located above grade and not in a pit or a vault
    - The well siting must meet the minimum setback distances specified in **WAC 173-160-171** for all water wells:

Source of Contamination	**Minimum Setback (ft.)**
Existing building structure or projection	5
Septic tank, holding tank, containment vessel, pump chamber, distribution box	50
Building sewer, public sewer, collection, nonperforated sewer distribution lines	50
Edge of drainfield, proposed and reserve drainfield areas	100
Other potential sources of contamination (e.g., manure lagoons, hazardous waste sites, chemical/petroleum storage, pipelines, livestock barns)	100
Sea/saltwater intrusion areas	100
Boundary of a permitted or previously permitted solid waste landfill	1,000

    - In addition to the minimum setbacks listed above, the proposed irrigation well shall:
        i. Be located where it is not subject to ponding
        ii. Located outside of the floodway
        iii. Protected from a one hundred-year flood and from any surface or subsurface drainage capable of impairing the quality of the groundwater supply

4. **Cross-Connection Prevention:**

- Private well owners proposing the continued use of a well for irrigation purposes are responsible for making sure backflow and cross-connection is prevented by disconnecting the proposed irrigation well from their potable water supply. Documentation showing the physical disconnection must be submitted **before receiving final replacement well source site application approval or final septic system site design approval.**
- When a property owner is connecting to a public water system and proposing the continued use of their well for irrigation purposes only, the applicant must obtain acknowledgement from the water company that they may continue using the well for irrigation and have met any and all cross-connection prevention requirements that the company may have **before receiving final replacement well source site application approval or final on-site sewage system site design approval.**

5. **Legal Requirements:**
    - Applicants proposing the use of an existing well as an irrigation well in lieu of decommissioning it must provide a signed, notarized, and recorded declaration of covenant stating the well is to be used for irrigation purposes only **before receiving final replacement well source site application approval or final on-site sewage system site design approval.**
    - The County has provided a template Declaration of Covenant for Well Used for Irrigation Only that may be used by applicants as the basis for their Declaration of Covenant.
    - The Declaration of Covenant must at least include a declaration stating that:
        i. Current and future property owners, successors, or assignees will use the well solely for irrigation purposes and it may not be connected to any potable water supplies.
        ii. The minimum setback distances specified in this memo apply to the irrigation well.
        iii. The well will be utilized to irrigate not more than ½ acre in area of lawn or non-commercial garden.
        iv. The irrigation well must be maintained as usable and in good repair.
        v. When the well becomes unusable, abandoned, or when its use has been permanently discontinued, or when it becomes in such disrepair that its continued use is impractical or an environmental, safety, or public health hazard it shall be decommissioned.
6. Maintenance:

- Owners are responsible for the long-term maintenance of the irrigation well when it comes to physical safety, water quantity, and water quality. Public Health Seattle and King County shall not be held accountable for any threats to safety, injuries, illness or death that an irrigation well may cause.

Conclusion:

The default practice of the King County On-Site Sewage Program when handling replacement well source site applications and applications involving a property using a private well that is planning on connecting to a public water system is to require the preexisting well to be decommissioned **before receiving final replacement well source site application approval or final septic system site design approval.** A property that proposes using an existing well as an irrigation well must demonstrate that the proposed irrigation well meets the standards set forth in this memo. Additionally, the applicant must provide a recorded declaration of covenant stating the well is to be used for irrigation purposes only. Further, if a property owner is seeking to use their existing well for irrigation purposes when connecting to a public water system, they must obtain approval from the public water system and meet their cross-connection requirements.

Notes:

- **Public Health Seattle King County does not review new irrigation well proposals.**
- Consistent with Chapter 90.44.050 RCW **permit exempt withdrawals of groundwater are limited to ½ acre of irrigation.**
    - Irrigation wells are limited to ½ acre of irrigation *unless specified by an Ecology Water Right Certificate.*
- **When the King County On-Site Sewage Program processes on-site sewage system repair/replacement applications,** unused, abandoned wells, and preexisting wells that are not a domestic water supply which do not have a declaration of covenant that the well is to be used for irrigation purposes only will not prevent the application from being processed nor will they necessarily be required to be decommissioned. The top priority when processing on-site sewage system repair/replacement applications is to produce a net public health benefit by addressing the failing on-site sewage system. However, the presence of a well that is unused, abandoned, or in a state of disrepair to the point where it is an environmental health or safety hazard will be documented thoroughly, recommended for decommissioning, and may result in a non-conforming repair status when setbacks cannot be met.