

Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee

Hearing on Safeguarding Residential Water Wells

November 14, 2025

**Testimony from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation
and Natural Resources**

Good Morning Chairman Miller and members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee.

My name is Gale Blackmer and I serve as the State Geologist and Director of Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (DCNR) Bureau of Geological Survey. I am excited to be here today to talk about establishing professional licensing criteria for water well, geothermal, geotechnical, and environmental well drillers.

Driller licensure will establish statewide construction and siting standards for private wells through best industry practices and institute statewide certification and licensing standards for water, geothermal, and environmental/geotechnical well drillers. This has been a long-time policy priority for DCNR as well as for a diverse set of nonprofit and industry stakeholders across the Commonwealth.

Licensing is necessary to strengthen accountability within the industry; ensure industry construction and siting standards are upheld; and support public health and consumer protections.

Water wells are the primary source of drinking water for millions of Pennsylvanians. Yet, the Commonwealth is one of only two states to not have established industry standards for well siting and construction and one of only three states that do not have statewide industry licensing requirements.

In Pennsylvania, there are no standards required for well drillers and no protections in place for homeowners. This leaves many Pennsylvanians

vulnerable to improperly sited and/or constructed wells that can result in water contamination, health issues, and costly repair bills.

Proper siting and construction protects a well from common sources of contamination like septic systems, roads, fuel tanks, livestock yards, and agricultural chemicals.

And even just one improperly sited or poorly constructed private well can threaten the integrity of neighboring private and public water supplies, potentially endangering entire communities. This means how your neighbor's well is sited and constructed can impact the quality of water coming out of your faucet.

Additionally, Pennsylvania is experiencing more periods of drought in recent years. Wells that are properly sited and constructed in bedrock are less susceptible to the impacts of a long-term drought than poorly sited and constructed shallow wells.

The drilling of water, geothermal, and environmental/geotechnical wells requires a level of expertise in geology, drilling techniques, environmental regulations, and industry standards to safeguard water quality and protect public health.

The Bureau of Geological Survey currently is responsible for licensing Pennsylvania water well drillers, however it is nothing more than a transactional process in which the company pays the department a nominal fee to be licensed. There are no demonstrations of aptitude or experience and no professional or industry standards enforced.

If we want to ensure that Pennsylvanians have access to safe water supplies, we need to do what 47 other states have done in terms of establishing licensing criteria and what 48 states have already done in requiring the industry uphold siting and construction standards.

We believe we can accomplish both of these important policy priorities through a commonsense approach that relies on existing industry standards without adding new regulations or permitting processes. In

doing so, licensed drillers would be required to uphold the industry standards that are set within the Uniform Construction Code (UCC) related to siting and constructing wells in Pennsylvania.

DCNR supports a licensing framework that would add the well drillers to the Crane Operating Board to build on efficiencies of an existing board. This pairing makes sense because these two occupations are both considered trades that do not require four-year degrees, are involved in pre-construction and construction activities, and require the operation of heavy machinery and mobile, hydraulic equipment.

This licensing criteria would propose two categories of licensing for water, geothermal and environmental/geotechnical drillers. An “expert well driller” category would demonstrate competency in three or more drilling techniques. A “specialized driller” category would show proficiency in just one. For example, if a driller solely constructs water wells, they would seek the specialized category for water well drilling. Additionally, a trainee category would establish a much needed entry point into the drilling workforce.

A two-year grandfathering phase would allow all existing qualifying drillers to acquire their licensing credentials by demonstrating the appropriate footage of drilling in the past five years.

New licensees would be required to pass applicable examinations, as determined by the board.

Licensing would be renewed every two years and licensed drillers would be responsible for upholding the licensing criteria and completing the necessary continuing education, as determined by the board.

This innovative approach achieves a key objective: improving the quality and safety of private water wells while relying on existing industry standards and without adding new permitting or regulatory processes.

Licensed well drillers will be required to uphold siting and construction criteria established through the International Plumbing Code and adopted

through the Uniform Construction Code (UCC); these are standards that already exist and are reviewed and approved within the Commonwealth every three years by the UCC Review and Advisory Council.

The UCC was established to provide a standardized set of building regulations that uphold safety standards and regulatory compliance and is rigorously vetted across various industry sectors.

This proposal simply requires licensed well drillers to uphold these UCC/IPC industry standards.

This licensing framework also ensures greater accountability within the industry by requiring companies to demonstrate bonding and liability coverage and ensure additional consumer protections are put in place in the case of an accident or incompetency.

Because Pennsylvania for too long has not had accountability in place for this industry, it is important to ensure drillers will not be held liable for wells that were drilled prior to the enactment of these licensing criteria or for the actions of another driller. There is specific language in the legislation that absolves well drillers of liability for wells drilled prior to the enactment of the licensing framework. Licensed well drillers shall inform the well owner of any structural deficiencies or well conditions that do not meet industry standards. It will be up to the well owner on how to proceed. For wells constructed after the licensing framework is in place, well owners will have the opportunity to submit a statement of complaint form if they have concerns that their well was drilled properly or out of compliance with the industry standards. These complaints would be investigated by the licensure board.

The current Water Well Drillers License Act (Act 610 of 1956) requires drillers to report location and certain well construction and operation data for each well drilled to DCNR's Bureau of Geological Survey. The Bureau manages the data in the Pennsylvania Groundwater Information System (PaGWIS), which holds hundreds of thousands of water well records and more than 2,000 spring records, making it an important public-access

source of groundwater, water well, and spring data. The new legislation would maintain existing reporting requirements that have been in place for decades while adding a new category for well modifications.

All licensed drillers would need to be associated with a registered well drilling company, and each drilling company would need to register through the Department of State. In an effort to improve efficiencies and reduce burdens on the industry, drillers would no longer be required to register their drill rigs with the licensing agency. They would only be required to acquire the proper registrations through PENNDOT.

A few things this legislation will not do:

- This is not intended to regulate oil and gas activity. In Pennsylvania, the regulation of natural gas and oil drilling is comprehensive and stringent. The state requires permits and approvals for oil and gas wells and related activities to protect the environment and public health. The process begins long before drilling and continues until the well is properly plugged and abandoned.
- This proposal does not require water well testing and leaves that up to the local and county jurisdictions. We certainly advise well owners to test their water annually to ensure that the water is safe; water well tests can detect contaminants and allow well owners to take corrective action.
- This proposal does continue the well reporting functionalities that have been in place for decades but does not include an individual well registration requirement.
- This proposal does not establish any permitting requirements for well drilling. That functionality most commonly occurs at the municipal and even county level.
- Finally, this proposal does not institute additional environmental regulations – it instead relies on the industry standards that have been adopted through the Uniform Construction Code.

This proposed licensing framework has been vetted across agencies and is supported not just by DCNR but by the Department of Environmental Protection, Department of State, Department of Labor and Industry, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health, and PENNDOT. Additionally, this proposed framework has received support by a wide variety of partners, including the Choose Clean Water Coalition, Pennsylvania Environmental Council, Pennsylvania Council of Professional Geologists, National Association of Water Companies, Pennsylvania Municipal Authorities Association, Pennsylvania Rural Health Association, the Pennsylvania Independent Oil and Gas Association, and the Marcellus Shale Coalition.

The result is a commonsense bipartisan approach that establishes a licensing framework within the Department of State to emphasize public health, public safety, consumer protections, and industry accountability.

This licensing framework establishes a fair playing field within the industry so that certain drillers cannot simply underbid by building inferior and unsafe wells. The licensing criteria is consistent with what many states have in place and does not establish excessive or burdensome requirements for acquiring and maintaining licensure.

There are so many reasons why Pennsylvania should adopt this licensing criteria – but I want to reinforce these important points:

- We need to protect human health
- Safeguard our drinking and groundwater resources
- Advance professional accountability within the industry
- Promote workplace safety
- Uphold environmental laws and regulations
- Ensure continued education
- And establish ongoing workforce pipelines for entering into the drilling industry

This proposed legislation is a long time in the making and several attempts to bring accountability to the industry have failed over the past thirty years.

The novel framework addresses the major concerns that have surfaced during these prior attempts with a deliberate effort to strengthen efficiencies and reduce redundancies while accomplishing our overarching goal of safeguarding Pennsylvania's drinking water.

If not now, when?

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We look forward to working with this committee to pass legislation that establishes this licensing criteria. I am happy to answer any of your questions and please feel free to reach out to me directly if you have any follow-up questions.