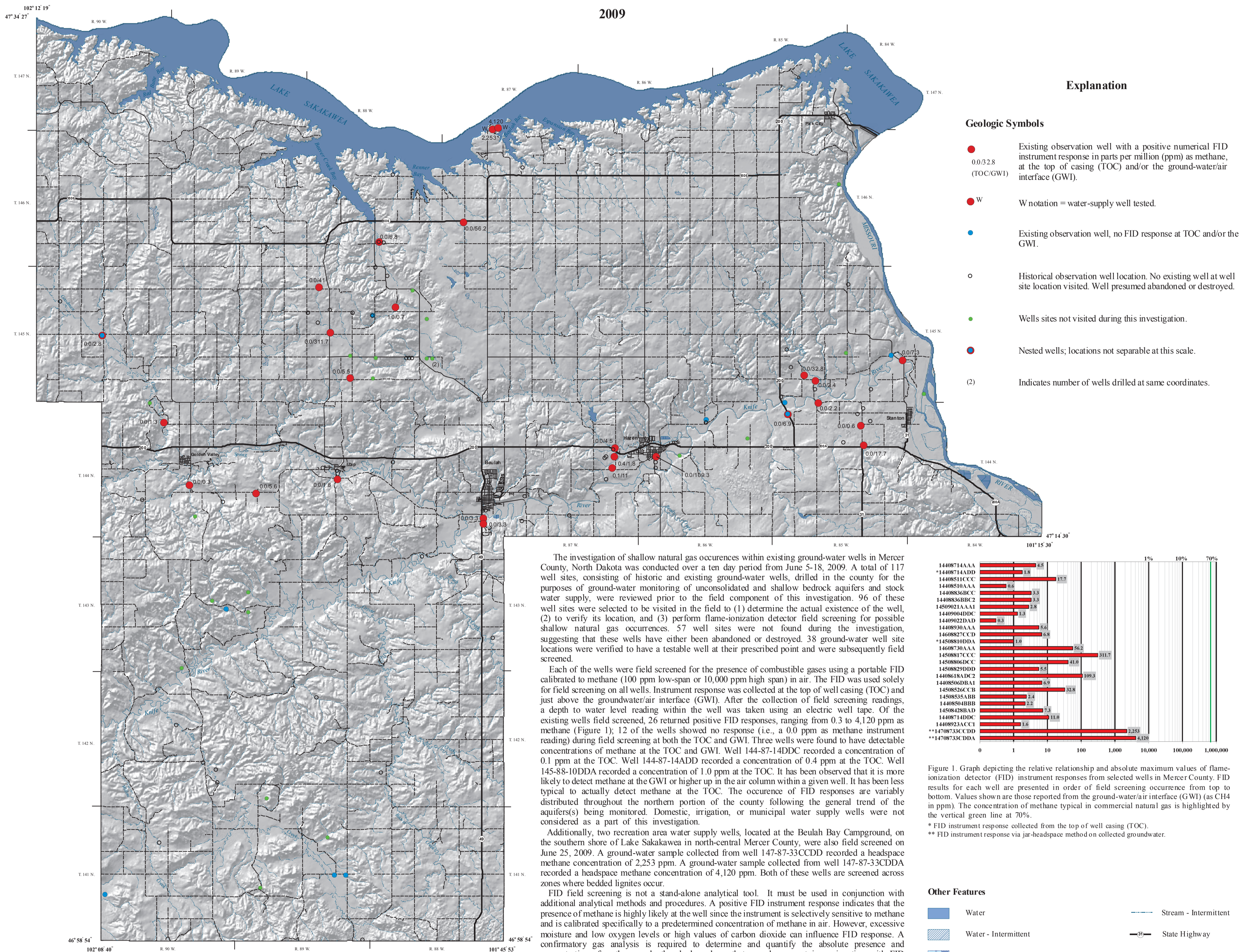


# Field Screening for Shallow Gas in Mercer County, North Dakota

Fred J. Anderson and Cassie B. Gudmunsen

2009



The investigation of shallow natural gas occurrences within existing ground-water wells in Mercer County, North Dakota was conducted over a ten day period from June 5-18, 2009. A total of 117 well sites, consisting of historic and existing ground-water wells, drilled in the county for the purposes of ground-water monitoring of unconsolidated and shallow bedrock aquifers and stock water supply, were reviewed prior to the field component of this investigation. 96 of these well sites were selected to be visited in the field to (1) determine the actual existence of the well, (2) to verify its location, and (3) perform flame-ionization detector field screening for possible shallow natural gas occurrences. 57 well sites were not found during the investigation, suggesting that these wells have either been abandoned or destroyed. 38 ground-water well site locations were verified to have a testable well at their prescribed point and were subsequently field screened.

Each of the wells were field screened for the presence of combustible gases using a portable FID calibrated to methane (100 ppm low-span or 10,000 ppm high span) in air. The FID was used solely for field screening on all wells. Instrument response was collected at the top of well casing (TOC) and just above the groundwater/air interface (GWI). After the collection of field screening readings, a depth to water level reading within the well was taken using an electric well tape. Of the existing wells field screened, 26 returned positive FID responses, ranging from 0.3 to 4,120 ppm as methane (Figure 1); 12 of the wells showed no response (i.e., a 0.0 ppm as methane instrument reading) during field screening at both the TOC and GWI. Three wells were found to have detectable concentrations of methane at the TOC and GWI. Well 144-87-14DDC recorded a concentration of 0.1 ppm at the TOC. Well 144-87-14ADD recorded a concentration of 0.4 ppm at the TOC. Well 145-88-10DDA recorded a concentration of 1.0 ppm at the TOC. It has been observed that it is more likely to detect methane at the GWI or higher up in the air column within a given well. It has been less typical to actually detect methane at the TOC. The occurrence of FID responses are variably distributed throughout the northern portion of the county following the general trend of the aquifer(s) being monitored. Domestic, irrigation, or municipal water supply wells were not considered as a part of this investigation.

Additionally, two recreation area water supply wells, located at the Beulah Bay Campground, on the southern shore of Lake Sakakawea in north-central Mercer County, were also field screened on June 25, 2009. A ground-water sample collected from well 147-87-33CCDD recorded a headspace methane concentration of 2,253 ppm. A ground-water sample collected from well 147-87-33CDDA recorded a headspace methane concentration of 4,120 ppm. Both of these wells are screened across zones where bedded lignites occur.

FID field screening is not a stand-alone analytical tool. It must be used in conjunction with additional analytical methods and procedures. A positive FID instrument response indicates that the presence of methane is highly likely at the well since the instrument is selectively sensitive to methane and is calibrated specifically to a predetermined concentration of methane in air. However, excessive moisture and low oxygen levels or high values of carbon dioxide can influence FID response. A confirmatory gas analysis is required to determine and quantify the absolute presence and concentration of methane and other hydrocarbons that may be present in conjunction with FID screening results. The reconnaissance level screening results presented here are intended to aid in the selection of future candidate observation well locations and or areas to conduct additional sampling and analysis and potentially focus future field investigative efforts.

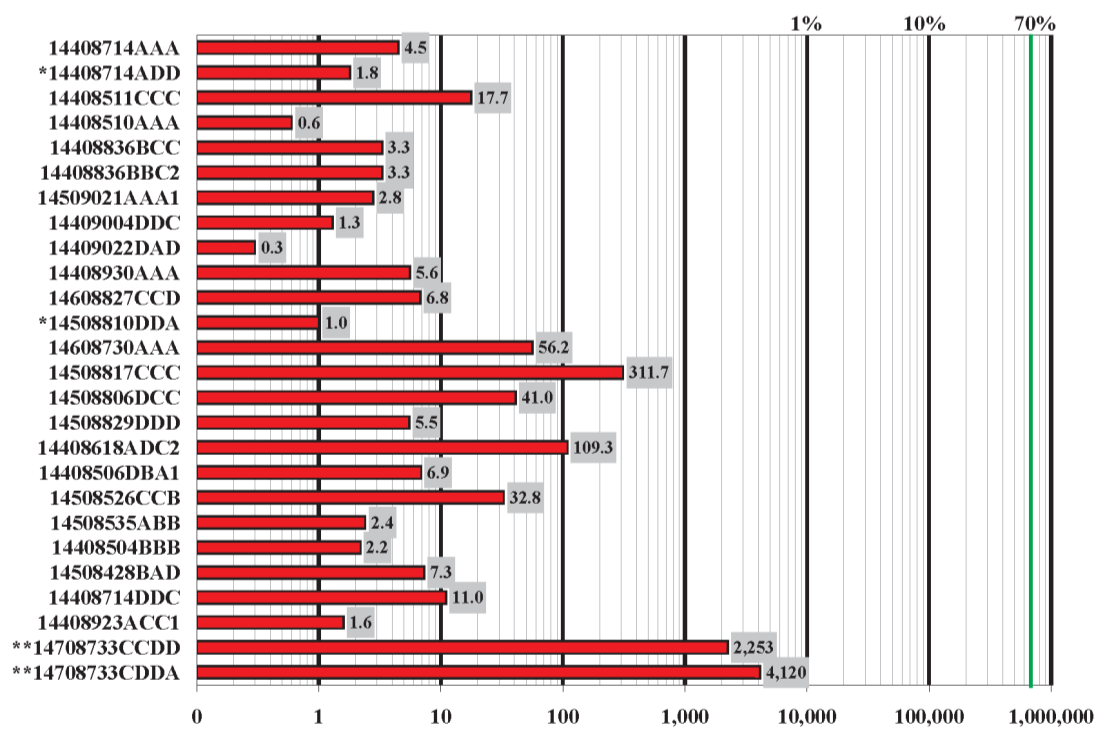


Figure 1. Graph depicting the relative relationship and absolute maximum values of flame-ionization detector (FID) instrument responses from selected wells in Mercer County. FID results for each well are presented in order of field screening occurrence from top to bottom. Values shown are those reported from the ground-water/air interface (GWI) (as CH<sub>4</sub> in ppm). The concentration of methane typical in commercial natural gas is highlighted by the vertical green line at 70%.

\* FID instrument response collected from the top of well casing (TOC).  
\*\* FID instrument response via jar-headspace method on collected groundwater.

