

Leahy: BLM methane rule will benefit sportsmen

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Right now, in New Mexico, the Bureau of Land Management is approving oil and gas development at an unprecedented pace. There are already more than 20,000 active oil and gas wells in the San Juan Basin and another 16,000 in New Mexico's portion of the Permian Basin. The primary byproduct of all of this drilling is methane. Methane is an extremely potent greenhouse gas—87 times worse than carbon dioxide over a 20 year period. New Mexico is the state that suffers most from methane pollution. A 2,500-square-mile cloud of gas hangs over the Four Corners region in the northwest part of the state.

The BLM methane waste rule will help stop haphazard leasing and drilling of public lands driven solely by the interests of the oil and gas industry. A strong rule can force better resource planning to reduce the industry's footprint on the land, reduce fragmentation of critical wildlife habitat, and reduce climate pollution. A strong rule will also require stipulations for oil and gas leases and place conditions on applications for permits to drill that would protect wildlife corridors and New Mexico's tradition of hunting and fishing. For example, in Northern New Mexico's Greater Chaco region, a haphazard patchwork of lands leased for oil and gas development results in islands of wildlife habitat that are unusable to game animals.

Sportsmen rely on wildlife corridors to keep game populations healthy, and New Mexico's economy relies on sportsmen. A 2014 New Mexico Department of Game and Fish study found that the state has 87,600 hunters who spend \$345.5 million a year on outdoor activities. Sportsmen support 4,755 jobs in the state representing \$156 million in labor and \$29.5 million in state and local tax revenue. Yet the state of New Mexico continues to yield to the oil and gas lobby. Last October, the Farmington Field Office of the BLM held an oil and gas lease sale for parcels in the Santa Fe National Forest. In addition to setting the precedent of oil and gas leasing in the forest, development on these parcels — which would include access roads, fracking, and flaring — would have numerous negative environmental impacts, including on critical wildlife habitat. The Farmington Field Office forecasts up to 1,600 new shale oil wells and 2,000 new shale gas wells in the coming years.

The Farmington Field Office has a dubious history when it comes to oil and gas leasing. The office used the Energy Policy Act of 2005, Section 390 Categorical Exclusions to avoid environmental review on 1,389 applications for permits to drill between 2006 and 2008. This amounts to roughly 70 percent of all drilling applications in New Mexico. The Categorical Exclusions could be used when approving permits in the Santa Fe National Forest or any new drilling permit. These permits to drill also avoided any sort of resource management planning, which would have limited drilling to preserve the integrity of landscapes and important historical sites such as Chaco Canyon.

The concern, however, is greater than just the immediate impact on wildlife. Methane has a serious long-term impact on the climate. New Mexico has suffered from drought and climate change. Catastrophic wildfires harm important wildlife habitat and reduce populations, not to mention threaten and destroy the lives of everyday New Mexicans. The BLM rule, in addition to preventing land fragmentation from destroying wildlife corridors, will reduce climate pollution and help New Mexico avoid the negative impacts of climate change on wildlife, the landscape, and the entire state.

This rule would address some of the lowest hanging fruit, reducing on-the-ground landscape impacts for New Mexico's sportsmen. Contrary to industry claims, compliance with these rules is relatively inexpensive. Industry could cut methane emissions by 40 percent from 2018 projected levels at an annual cost of less than one penny on average per thousand cubic feet of produced natural gas simply by adopting already available emissions-control technology and operating practices. The adoption of these rules benefits not only sportsmen, but also all New Mexicans.

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