

# Column: Methane policies can boost N.M. economy

By Patrick Von Barga and Jason Libersky 10:06 p.m. MDT October 10, 2015

New Mexico's San Juan Basin is one of the nation's largest natural gas fields. Such a rich energy supply sitting beneath our feet requires wise management. Gov. Susana Martinez recognized this in her recently unveiled energy plan, a proposal that seeks to balance job growth and economic opportunity with the use of both fossil fuels and lower carbon sources of energy.

There is one vital component of that plan that people on every side of the energy issue can and should support: maximizing profitability and minimizing environmental impact by addressing the oil and gas industry's methane emissions problem.

New Mexico made headlines last year when NASA revealed a methane "hot spot" the size of Delaware hovering over the San Juan Basin. The main component of natural gas, methane that leaks into the atmosphere is not only a source of serious air pollution, it also represents significant economic loss.

Nationally, it is estimated that methane emissions released into the atmosphere would be worth \$1.8 billion to \$2 billion per year if it could be captured and sold into the marketplace. In a recent analysis of venting and flaring on New Mexico's public and tribal lands (where much of the state's drilling takes place), the energy consulting firm ICF found this wasted natural gas was worth more than \$100 million in 2013.

As the Martinez administration recognized this week, reducing methane emissions and cutting back flaring are the right things to do for New Mexico's taxpayers and the industry itself: "flared gas is a valuable resource that could bring additional revenues to both operators and the state. If the proper infrastructure is in place, gas that is typically vented or flared can be captured."

It's a sentiment shared by both sides of the aisle. Martinez's energy plan joins an earlier call from New Mexico Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, and Reps. Ben Ray Lujan and

Michelle Lujan Grisham (all Democrats) for smart federal policies to address the issue. In this rare case we find an issue that can benefit all, and that we can all agree on.

In fact, a Benenson Strategy Group poll found that 65 percent of New Mexicans and 57 percent of Republicans Westwide support strong action on curbing natural gas waste.

Reducing methane waste is also the right thing to do for New Mexico's economy. The Center for Methane Emissions Solutions hosted a business roundtable this month in Albuquerque showcasing several companies involved in the methane mitigation industry. These companies provide the services and technologies that enable the oil and gas industry to reduce emissions and deliver more product to market. They're innovative, they're effective, and they are creating highly skilled, good-paying jobs right here in New Mexico.

According to a recent Datu Research business study, New Mexico ranks 10th in the nation for the number of employee locations in the methane mitigation industry. It's a good start, but unfortunately we are still lagging neighboring states like Colorado and Wyoming, which have moved in recent years to reduce methane pollution and waste.

The global economic opportunity is huge. Production of natural gas is expected to increase by 56 percent in the U.S. by 2040, and 64 percent outside of the United States in the same time frame. If we foster the development of the methane mitigation industry here over the next decade, the world will be buying American made — not foreign made — products and services to capture valuable methane emissions. And that will mean economic growth and more high-paying jobs here at home.

Given the importance of cutting methane emissions, the broad and bipartisan recognition of the problem of methane waste, the benefit to oil and gas producers to capture and monetize that waste, the benefits to state and tribal government revenue, and the economic growth and job-creation potential of the methane mitigation industry, it's time we tackle this problem — and capture the economic opportunity — right here in New Mexico.

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