

Support EPA rules on methane emissions

Almost two years ago scores of invested citizens from western Colorado made the trip across the mountains to testify in Aurora before the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission. Along with our Front Range neighbors, we were investing in the future of our state.

The commission was holding public hearings on new rules that would control emissions from oil and gas transmission, storage and processing. The rules specifically addressed methane leaks. Stakeholders, including industry representatives, residents living near oil and gas facilities, government entities and environmental groups, showed up to support the common-sense proposal.

The rules were passed. These are some of the toughest air quality protections in the country; protections of which our government, citizens and industry are rightfully proud. In fact, Colorado has become a national leader in this regard, and other states like Wyoming, California and Pennsylvania have looked to us in forming their own regulations to govern oil and gas emissions.

Natural gas is mostly methane, some of which leaks into the atmosphere during all phases of production. We can't see it or smell it, but having bigger-than-normal quantities of the gas packs a wallop for our ground-level atmosphere; it's 80 times more efficient at trapping heat from solar radiation than carbon dioxide in the relative "short term" of 20 years, and therefore a major contributor to global warming. Scientists estimate that leaks from oil and gas production make up about a quarter of the warming we are experiencing today from greenhouse gas emissions not naturally present in the atmosphere.

That February in Aurora, Coloradans set out to solve this problem. However, for our rules to be truly meaningful, we need to see other states invest in these protections as well. Methane, unlike state governments, isn't contained at state lines and Colorado's air sheds are bordered by Wyoming, New Mexico and Utah; all with heavy oil and gas activities. Unless other states follow similar rules, Coloradans will suffer the effects of their inaction.

That's not fair. Air pollution from oil and gas sites is not a problem that can be solved piece meal, nationwide rules are needed to level the playing field for states, industry, and the public health of all Americans. This scenario is likely to play out on the world stage as well. Countries across the globe are watching the U.S. for the development of new technologies to address oil and gas emissions.

Now, two federal agencies are seeking to implement air quality rules on a national scale that would similarly limit the emissions of methane and other air pollutants from oil and gas facilities. The EPA released a draft rule in the fall that is open for comment until Friday, Dec. 4, and the BLM is looking to release its own rules before the end of the year.

Industry leaders in Colorado are already implementing the state rules and receiving a return for their investment by capturing product leaks (methane) and selling it. Nearly 8 million metric tons of this energy resource is lost annually through leaks into the atmosphere; enough to meet the heating and cooking needs of 6 million homes. The proposed EPA standard requires companies to look for leaks and fix them. Sounds like common sense. However, it is unfortunate that the EPA doesn't address existing oil and gas facilities similar to Colorado's rules; big savings might well be available. The EPA proposal should also require regular, monthly or quarterly inspections to ensure rapid response.

The market has responded to the new rules. Nine companies are making it their job to target "fugitive" oil and gas emissions, eliminating the need for smaller operators to invest in expensive leak-detection equipment and realize bigger profits from the capture and sale of their product.

In the race to slow the process of global warming, we are running to preserve human health as well as the economies and ecologies we depend on for life. Climate change affects the social and environmental determinants of health – clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter. According to the World Health Organization, global warming that occurred since the 1970s caused more than 14,000 excess deaths annually by 2004. Direct damage costs to health, excluding costs in health-determining sectors like agriculture, water and sanitation, is estimated to be between \$2-4 billion a year by 2030. Those least able to cope are those in developing countries, the elderly among us, those with existing ailments, and children.

The EPA comment deadline is Dec. 4 – Friday. You can invest in the future by showing your support of the new rules by taking a moment to email your thoughts to a-and-r-Docket@epa.gov.

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