

# New Pa. methane rules will help Oil and gas operations need to be better regulated.

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By Nadia Steinzor

A crew works on a drilling rig at a well site for shale-based natural gas near Zelienople. Pennsylvania officials often boast about this being the second-highest natural-gas-producing state in the nation, usually when playing up purported economic benefits and downplaying well-documented environmental impacts. For a welcome change, the state's high ranking was invoked last week as a reason to curtail pollution caused by surging oil and gas operations.

Gov. Tom Wolf's administration announced a plan to reduce methane pollution from drilling, hydraulic fracturing and related development. Methane, a greenhouse gas 86 times more potent than carbon dioxide over a 20-year period, is a major driver of climate change. In 2014, Pennsylvania's oil and gas producers reported leaking into the environment some 100,000 metric tons of methane. That's enough natural gas to heat nearly 65,000 homes.

Curbing methane pollution would directly help the many Pennsylvanians suffering from the environmental and health consequences of living near oil and gas operations. Stemming releases of methane also would lower emissions of pollutants like nitrogen oxides, which cause health-harming smog, and hazardous substances such as benzene, a known carcinogen, and toluene, which is related to kidney and liver problems.

Several years into the Marcellus Shale boom, it's high time for change. The state's own data show increasing levels of pollution from expanding natural-gas operations. The state figures are likely underestimated, though, since only emissions from large sources have to be reported, small leaks generally go undetected and emission events from equipment failures are not calculated. The industry doesn't conduct real-time monitoring, so no one's minding the store to truly know what's happening.

Given this, the Wolf administration's methane proposal is a positive first step toward its stated goal of reducing the environmental impact of drilling. This is particularly important because oil and gas air pollution has been largely unregulated in Pennsylvania. Even the minimal requirements for leak detection and repair in place don't apply to the thousands of wells and associated equipment constructed before 2013.

A concept paper released by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection outlines a methane-reduction plan that would cover unconventional gas wells and both processing and transmission facilities. It would blend regulations to reduce emissions from production and processing facilities, adopt new and strengthened permit requirements for operators to conduct regular leak detection and repair, and use the best available technology and best management practices to reduce leaks from wells, pipelines and other infrastructure.

It remains to be seen when these proposals will be finalized and what they will accomplish. Also unknown is the degree to which operators will be held accountable for the pollution they cause. As our organization Earthworks and others have pointed out in research reports, industry oversight and enforcement are the true test of regulations and policies. And Pennsylvania's own data show that both have come up wanting.

We can only hope that when DEP issues the new methane regulations and permits, it will also have the funding and technology needed to conduct inspections and ensure that operators follow the law.

It's also increasingly clear, borne out by a growing body of science, that to have a fair chance of avoiding the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, the vast majority of the world's fossil fuel reserves — including natural gas — must be kept in the ground. Pennsylvania's two stated desires, to address climate change and continue to expand oil and gas development, will remain contradictory.

Nonetheless, it's very welcome news that DEP has finally grown tired of waiting for operators to do the right thing and instead is moving forward with binding rules on methane. As DEP Secretary John Quigley pointed out during a webinar about the new methane plan, even though a few companies have taken steps to reduce leaks and emissions, "without requirements, industry as a whole won't take comprehensive action to address the methane problem."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recognizes this as well, having recently proposed federal rules to control emissions of methane and volatile organic compounds from new oil and gas operations nationwide. Let us hope that Pennsylvania's efforts to control pollution from existing sources will help pave the way for EPA to expand its rules to cover all oil and gas wells and facilities, too. Doing so is essential to protect the health of the planet and those in Pennsylvania, and across the nation, who live near oil and gas operations.

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