

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Fixing the Methane Leak that Deflate Natural-Gas Gains-*Wall Street Journal* February 3, 2016

Porter Ranch is the placid Los Angeles neighborhood where Elliott and E.T. rode their flying bike in Steven Spielberg's blockbuster movie. Since October, however, what's been rising into the air above these quiet streets is methane. One hundred thousand tons have leaked from the nearby Aliso Canyon natural-gas storage facility—some 45,000 pounds an hour right now with no end in sight. It may be the worst environmental disaster in the U.S. since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

One difference is that Aliso Canyon hasn't caused any loss of life. The Deepwater Horizon rig exploded, killing 11; the California gas well has not, though concerns about combustion have hampered efforts to plug the leak and led officials to declare a no-fly zone above it. More than 2,000 families were evacuated from the neighborhood after residents experienced headaches, vomiting and bloody noses, and the Los Angeles district attorney on Tuesday filed criminal charges against the facility's owner, Southern California Gas. But whereas the Gulf oil spill was on television around the clock, this spill is invisible to the naked eye (but can be [seen](#) with special infrared cameras).

Aliso Canyon deserves national attention, not least because uncontrolled emissions of methane—a greenhouse gas 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide over a frame of 20 years—are endemic throughout the oil and gas industry. What's happening now in California, a massive leak resulting from well failure, is only an extreme example.

The Environmental Defense Fund, which I lead, has worked with over 100 partners in industry and academia on the most comprehensive peer-reviewed [studies](#) ever conducted on methane emissions. What we found is that methane leaks happen all across the oil and gas system—at production sites and processing plants, in pipelines and storage facilities. And though natural gas releases half as much carbon as coal when burned, these leaks erode much of that advantage. The methane now being released from Aliso Canyon each day causes as much climate damage as the daily emissions from four coal-fired power plants.

Other leaks across the country may be smaller individually, but they add up to an estimated eight million tons of annual methane emissions. Those annual emissions will have the very same climate impact as the annual emissions from 160 coal plants during the next two decades.

Yet even with Aliso Canyon gushing methane as you read this, many in the industry are fighting rules that would reduce leaks. They call for a "voluntary" approach that simply won't fix the problem—or shore up public trust. Only rules that apply to all operators will work, and they can do it at low cost.

Recent studies in the [U.S.](#), [Canada](#) and [Mexico](#) by [ICF International](#) indicate that existing technology can cut methane leaks by between 40% and 54% at an average cost of a penny per thousand cubic feet of gas produced—about one-half of 1% of today’s price for that much gas. Stopping at least 45% of leakage globally would help the climate over the next 20 years as much as shutting down one-third of the world’s coal-fired power plants.

State leadership is crucial. In Colorado, new standards require companies to take simple steps, such as equipment and procedures to detect and fix leaks, that will prevent the release of over 100,000 tons of methane and 90,000 tons of volatile organic compounds each year. That’s the same effect as taking all of Colorado’s cars and trucks off the road, year after year. When the rules were put in place, in 2014, some warned that they would wreak economic havoc. Those worries were misplaced. For example, one company operating in the Denver-Julesburg Basin, [Noble Energy](#), said in 2015 it spent about \$3 million on [compliance](#), out of a capital expenditure that year of about \$1 billion.

But a national problem needs a national solution. The federal government could require systematic leak detection and repair at facilities like Aliso Canyon, but so far it hasn’t taken that step. The Environmental Protection Agency has [proposed](#) methane emission standards for new or heavily modified facilities, but the plan does nothing to curb emissions from existing wells and infrastructure that are the source of the problem today. The federal Transportation Department, which has jurisdiction over some facilities, is only now beginning to act.

As policy makers, industry leaders and environmentalists move to address this crisis, they should examine the facts on the ground. The oil and gas industry needs to recognize that this national methane problem cannot be solved through voluntary half-measures. And those who call for an immediate transition to renewable energy should realize that scaling renewables will take years. There is much to be done in the meantime to make natural-gas supply and delivery safer.

Mr. Krupp is president of the Environmental Defense Fund.