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California's Gas Gusher is Stanched, But Where are Tougher U.S. Rules on Leaks?
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What does it take to jog federal and state leaders to toughen rules curbing industrial pollution? When the industry is energy and the pollutant, methane, is invisible to the naked eye, it seems to take an awful lot.

Will the natural gas gusher that blossomed for nearly 100 days over the hills outside Los Angeles before it was stanched on Feb. 11 make a difference? We'll see.

A visit to the area on Tuesday by President Obama's energy secretary, Ernest Moniz, offered, at best, hints of a shift, when it could have provided the administration with a fresh starting line for a push on a new approach to prodding a reluctant industry to invest in a cleaner future. You can read his relevant remarks below.

Over all, the White House has yet to make a convincing case that Obama's "all of the above" energy strategy includes the necessary oversight.
For many years, the Environmental Protection Agency and environmental scientists and campaigners have pointed to the value— to the environment, climate and economy — in curbing leaks and stray emissions of natural gas from wells, pipelines, compressors, storage systems and other infrastructure. Natural gas is the best fossil fuel there is if it stays in a pipeline, but the methane it contains is a potent contributor to climate change if it escapes.

We did what we could here at The Times in 2009 when I was still on the news side. I found promising examples of industry workers relentlessly pursuing leak reductions. (Can someone clone Gene Desaulniers of BP?) But I kept hearing that it was easier in the gas and oil industry to get the green light from top executives for drilling new wells than fixing old ones, and industry lobbyists in Washington have relentlessly fought stricter oversight.

Here's the close-focus picture. The massive leak near Los Angeles, at a site called Aliso Canyon, forced thousands of people to evacuate homes in the prosperous Porter Ranch suburb for nearly four months and spewed nearly 100,000 tons of methane into the air. (Go here to see what that means in lost dollars and climate impact).

You can watch the erupting gas at its peak in aerial infrared video and watch the flow abruptly stopped on Feb. 11.

The use of infrared imagery by Earthworks and the Environmental Defense Fund clearly helped draw national attention to the problem. (Infrared imagery is an invaluable tool for any community concerned about gas leaks, and it can be a great boon for encouraging energy conservation, as well.)

Southern California Gas Company, which owns the huge subterranean gas storage system and the half-century-old converted oil well that failed, faces billions of dollars in lawsuits and criminal penalties. (A batch of prominent law firms quickly set up aporterranchlawsuit.com website.)

The nationwide issue is the vulnerability to leaks — both subtle and, occasionally, dramatic — of vast amounts of aging, poorly monitored and inadequately inspected gas and oil infrastructure.

A January story by Nichola Groom of Reuters laid out the scope of the infrastructure problem, from California across the nation:

The leaking well's owner, Southern California Gas Co., warned state utility regulators in 2014 of "major failures" without a rate hike to pay for comprehensive inspections of 229 storage wells.

Twenty-six of its wells were "high risk" and should be abandoned – even though they complied with state regulations, the utility wrote in a rate filing.

The previous year, Pacific Gas & Electric pointed to an absence of safety standards for storage wells as reason to launch its own monitoring program that went beyond state rules, according to an internal document obtained by Reuters.

The industry's rising concern underscores the scant oversight of 400 underground natural gas storage facilities in 30 U.S. states. Most storage fields are regulated by states, but national industry groups have pushed for federal oversight – unusual in an industry better known for fighting regulation.
Please read the article in full to get the national picture.
The administration's slow-motion response on rule-making is hard to understand, given that the benefits to both the environment and companies' bottom lines has been clear for years. Actions so far along these lines have nearly all been limited to new or planned wells and other facilities.

The brunt of the problem is at existing facilities. Another issue is that new or proposed rules so far are focused on wells and other infrastructure producing gas. The Aliso Canyon storage facility is part of the country's huge distribution system, as Jonathan Banks of the Clean Air Task Force recently pointed out.
To its credit, California has moved swiftly to update rules. The federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration has said it will be sending an advisory bulletin to owners and operators of underground natural gas storage facilities with recommendations to protect the public and workers and the environment and plans to release a natural gas transmission rule for existing pipelines.
InsideClimate News has a valuable close look at what's in the works.

In his remarks at a news conference in the San Fernando Valley on Tuesday, Moniz focused primarily on the local issue and the more than 400 gas storage facilities like the one that leaked. He pivoted promisingly to the nationwide issue but, as has too often been the case, there was no bottom line:
[T]he Department of Energy has had a particular focus over the last couple of years on energy infrastructure and, regrettably, there's a broader theme than Aliso Canyon. We have a lot of very old infrastructure in energy, and we have to address the 21st century and do so in a way that makes for a better infrastructure – a smarter one, a more resilient one….

Frankly, gas storage facilities need a fresh look in terms of some of the regulatory requirements – that was clearly brought home here. That's being done, and so the ideas are emerging. A need for stronger

monitoring here and elsewhere emerged.

And finally, I want to say, in a terms of broader picture, particularly in the climate context but also the safety context, we really have to push on what the President put into his Climate Action Plan in 2013 [*link*]– looking at and reducing dramatically methane leaks across the entire system from production to distribution, particularly in our cities.

My question is, who is the "we"? Who has to push?

Particularly given how Supreme Court machinations now potentially imperil the president's Clean Power Plan cutting power plant carbon dioxide emissions, it's more important than ever for the administration to "push on what the President put his his Climate Action Plan in 2013."

Or it can dally and wait for more infrared imagery like this:

The Environmental Defense Fund (here) and Natural Resources Defense Council (here) have both laid out convincing arguments that can provide a blueprint for prompt action.