

THE BLADE

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Plug the gas leaks

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The worst natural-gas leak in U.S. history was permanently sealed late last week in southern California — but not until an estimated 80,000 metric tons of emissions of methane and dangerous chemicals fouled the atmosphere for four months. This month, hundreds of residents of the central Ohio village of Crooksville were forced to flee their homes temporarily when a natural-gas transmission line broke, causing a leak.

Such incidents are, thankfully, the exception rather than the norm. Yet they add urgency to the debate in Washington over the need for effective, enforceable federal standards to reduce methane pollution from oil and gas wells, in Ohio and the rest of the country. An Obama Administration plan that could take effect this spring offers a good start toward that goal, but no more than that.

Methane is the second-largest source of global climate-warming emissions, but it has 25 times the potency of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas. Toxic chemicals released during methane leaks, such as benzene, can create smog that aggravates illnesses such as asthma and cancer.

New rules proposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would reduce methane pollution by an estimated 20 percent or more by 2025. They would toughen requirements for oil and natural gas producers to find and cap leaks from some wells and related equipment and facilities.

Predictably, the drillers' lobby and its political allies oppose the EPA rules, claiming compliance would be too costly and difficult. Last year, the industry allowed leaks of more than \$1 billion worth of methane across the country — enough to heat every home in Ohio.

In our state alone, oil and gas producers emitted almost 13,000 metric tons of methane in 2014. As drillers in Ohio increasingly rely on hydraulic fracturing to extract natural gas from shale deposits, such leaks threaten to increase.

The EPA rules — the first to address methane emissions — affect only new or upgraded wells and infrastructure. They would not cover the current operations of oil and gas wells, which represent more than two-thirds of the sources of methane pollution.

The administration proposal, while useful, is just a partial solution. Achieving the administration's goal of cutting methane pollution by as much as 45 percent over the next decade will require more-comprehensive policies.

Oil and gas producers say the EPA rules would kill jobs and increase energy costs for consumers, and claim dubiously that voluntary efforts by the industry to prevent methane leaks will suffice. EPA officials counter that any losses to producers would be more than offset by savings created through reducing the waste of resources caused by leaks.

In a recent guest column in *The Blade*, Melanie Houston, the Ohio Environmental Council's director of water policy and environmental health, noted that a number of Ohio-based companies install inexpensive technology that reduces methane pollution. Generating more work for these companies would create jobs and strengthen the state's economy, she argued, while curbing losses of natural gas. The next step is for the EPA to complete its first round of methane rules this year. That will provide a foundation for more-comprehensive standards to curb methane pollution from existing as well as new facilities. The latter is not likely to happen during the remainder of the Obama Administration — but it needs to happen quickly.

