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Editorial

Methane's threat: New EPA rules to cut emissions are a good start

The worst natural gas leak in U.S. history was permanently sealed this month in southern California, but not until an estimated 80,000 metric tons of emissions of methane and dangerous chemicals fouled the atmosphere for nearly four months.

This incident adds urgency to the debate in Washington over the need for effective, enforceable federal standards to reduce methane pollution from oil and gas wells. An Obama administration plan that could take effect this spring offers a good start toward that goal.

Gov. Tom Wolf announced a plan in January that seeks to reduce methane leaks and emissions at well sites and pipelines in Pennsylvania.

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

New rules proposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would reduce methane pollution by 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.

The drillers' lobby and its allies oppose the 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.

The EPA rules 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 next step is for the EPA to complete its first round of methane rules this year. That will provide a foundation for broader 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.