

# THE DENVER POST

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## Keep up the methane monitoring

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On March 10, President Obama and Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, stood outside the White House and announced a series of coordinated environmental policies, including plans to regulate methane pollution from hundreds of thousands of existing oil and gas wells.

The leaders pledged to reduce methane pollution from the oil and gas industry by 40 to 45 percent below 2012 levels by 2025. This is a big deal, and long overdue.

Natural gas, which is mostly methane, has displaced coal as the preferred fuel for running power plants. The decline of coal and ascendance of gas is a positive development for the environment and human health. Unlike coal, natural gas burns cleanly and releases no mercury or soot. Gas also emits far less carbon dioxide than coal to produce an equivalent amount of electricity. Wind and solar generation are growing quickly, but those sources still account for only around 6 percent of U.S. electricity production. This is why gas enthusiasts describe the fuel as an important tool for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet a cloud hangs over the pro-gas argument. Too much gas is leaking from our vast oil and natural gas infrastructure. Methane is a greenhouse gas many times more potent than carbon dioxide, and if too much gas escapes, the climate benefit of switching from coal is erased.

Industry advocates often note that methane emissions have fallen even as natural gas production has soared in recent years. If true, that is to be applauded. But the industry needs to do more. It should play an affirmative role in designing nationwide solutions to methane pollution, much as it has done here in Colorado.

In 2014, three of the state's biggest oil and gas producers collaborated with the Environmental Defense Fund and air-quality regulators to write rules for the detection and repair of gas leaks. The new regulations took effect in phases, starting in late 2014. In the last few months of that year — the only period for which public data is currently available — companies reported repairing more than 1,500 leaks.

Not every producer in the state embraced the new rules. Indeed, Colorado's largest producer of natural gas, WPX Energy (which has since sold its assets in the state), strongly objected. So did the largest industry trade group, the Colorado Oil and Gas Association. The crux of their complaint was about cost. The American Petroleum Institute echoed this view in a written response to Obama's recent announcement.

National regulators and environmental advocates should not be quick to dismiss the problem of cost. It is a real and practical impediment to keeping methane safely in the pipes.

While fixing a leak is usually a simple plumbing chore, finding a leak can be stunningly inefficient. The task often involves time-consuming manual inspections of individual piping components. A single wellsite can contain hundreds of such components. Hundreds of thousands of wells dot the nation.

Meanwhile, the industry is in the depths of a bust. As natural gas prices have plummeted, so has the financial incentive for plugging leaks. Most producers are losing money and laying off workers. These realities will undoubtedly strain both the will and capacity of companies to vigorously comply with forthcoming national methane rules.

Fortunately, there are emerging methane-detection technologies that could dramatically lower the expense of finding leaks. The Holy Grain is something akin to a smoke detector for methane, a device that is cheap, reliable, and automatic. The U.S. Department of Energy has made seed grants to nearly a dozen early stage innovators in this field. Some start-ups, like Quanta3 in Longmont, have shown encouraging advances.

As the EPA begins the Byzantine task of developing new methane regulations, it should consider ways to incentivize the adoption of emerging technologies that lower compliance costs. Congress might help the cause, too, by offering tax credits or accelerated depreciation to companies that deploy promising early-stage methane detection equipment. For its part, the industry needs to embrace this cause as an essential part of its mission. The legitimacy of natural gas as a pro-environment fuel depends on it.

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