

Observer-Reporter

Reducing methane emissions makes sense

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A key selling point of natural gas is that it's cheaper than coal and it burns cleaner, positioning it to be a bridge fuel as America and the rest of the world inevitably weans itself off fossil fuels and moves toward more environmentally friendly renewables.

But there's one pronounced downside to natural gas when it comes to climate change – methane is emitted in the natural gas production process, and it's not doing the planet any favors. It's the second-most common greenhouse gas discharged in the United States, just behind carbon dioxide, and it's the culprit in roughly one-fourth of global warming.

It's estimated that it traps 80 percent more heat in the atmosphere than a corresponding amount of carbon dioxide.

Reducing the amount of methane that's gushed into the atmosphere would help all of us in the short run by reducing respiratory problems, particularly among children and the elderly, and also in the long run by making the world more habitable for our children, grandchildren and all the generations that follow.

Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection is in the process of devising rules that would reduce the amount of methane produced by the oil and gas industry.

The industry itself has argued that it already is taking steps necessary to reduce methane emissions. According to the American Petroleum Institute, methane emissions have fallen by 11 percent over the last decade – but supporters say the regulations would put these steps on the books and make them mandatory among all the industry's players.

Upon announcing the proposed rules earlier this year, Gov. Tom Wolf explained that "Pennsylvania is the second-largest producer of natural gas in the nation behind Texas. We are uniquely positioned to be a national leader in addressing climate change while supporting and ensuring responsible energy development."

He also noted that "the best companies understand the business case for reducing methane leaks, as what doesn't leak into the atmosphere can be used for energy production."

As currently formulated, the regulations would put in place a new general permit for natural gas exploration, development and production facilities that would require up-to-date equipment be used, quarterly monitoring inspections and better record-keeping.

It would also require that compressor stations and processing facilities use diesel engines that bring down nitrous oxide and particulate-matter emissions by 90 percent, and establish procedures for leak detection and repair programs along production, gathering, transmission and distribution lines.

The simple mention of new regulations is typically accompanied by cries that they could cost jobs.

However, there's not a lot of evidence that reducing methane would reduce employment in the industry at all.

Moms Clean Air Force, an environmental advocacy organization, has pointed to the example set by Colorado.

In 2014, the state implemented the first direct regulations of methane in the nation, and the industry there has not been hurt as a result.

In fact, capturing the methane that would otherwise seep into Pennsylvania skies would be something else the industry could put on the market.

Reducing methane emissions would be a winning proposition for both the industry and the commonwealth's residents. These proposed, sensible regulations would help get us there.