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A Much-Needed Step on Methane Emissions

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President Obama's strategy to reduce America's greenhouse gas emissions and position the United States as a leader in the worldwide effort to combat climate change consists of two main initiatives: rules mandating more fuel-efficient cars and trucks, which are already on the books; and new and undeniably overdue regulations aimed at greatly reducing carbon dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants. These rules are not yet a done deal. A federal appeals court is expected to decide on their legality this summer in a case brought by an array of states and electric utilities.



The outcome of that case is a source of great anxiety in the White House and the scientific and environmental communities, but in the meantime, much to its credit, the administration has continued to press forward with other measures to reduce harmful emissions. The latest of these, announced Thursday, is a set of [much-anticipated steps to regulate emissions of methane](#) from new or modified oil and gas wells.

Methane, the main component of natural gas, is a powerful greenhouse gas second only to carbon dioxide in its ability to influence global temperatures. There is some confusion over exactly how powerful it actually is (it does not linger long in the atmosphere) and whether the methane leaks from wells and pipelines are large enough to nullify natural gas's clear advantages over coal as a source of electric power (some academics say yes, the White House and other academics say no).

Even so, it is obviously important to get a grip on it, and to that end Mr. Obama has set a goal of reducing methane emissions by up to 45 percent by 2025 from 2012 levels. The new rules require oil and gas companies to capture methane that escapes in the drilling process and from storage tanks, pipeline and other equipment in the field. Oil and gas companies, already suffering from weaker prices for both fuels, have complained loudly that this is one more expense they do not need. The Environmental Protection Agency argues otherwise: The added cost of compliance will be more than made up by various savings, including income from the sale of the natural gas that otherwise would have escaped into the atmosphere.

These rules will be increasingly important as industry continues to make new discoveries using the controversial technology that has made the natural gas boom possible, known as hydraulic fracturing. What the rules do not do is cover the multitude of existing oil and gas wells, which as of now account for

the vast bulk of methane emissions. The administration has promised to develop such rules in the months ahead; without them there is no chance that Mr. Obama's goals can be met.

Industry says it is proceeding with voluntary measures that will solve the problem. This is a song we have heard before and and it is no more seductive now than it has ever been. Colorado has already cracked down on existing sources, and, it seems, no oil and gas company in Colorado has gone out of business. If Colorado can regulate existing wells without economic disruption, so can the federal government.