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EPA's new methane rules are welcome, but more action needed

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No doubt, the oil and gas industry will fight the Environmental Protection Agency's [new methane leak rules](#). But if you care about climate change and air quality, the new rules represent an important step.

The EPA has said the rules will lower emissions by 510,000 tons by 2025. Predictably, the oil and gas industry has decried the rules, saying they are not only unnecessary but are also hitting the industry at the worst possible time. But the agency predicts the rules will ultimately benefit the industry. Yes, they will cost companies an estimated \$530 million in 2025, but they should also generate savings of as much as \$690 million from reduced waste.

Locally, the new rules won't have much of an impact on the Eagle Ford Shale, where natural gas flaring has been so big it's visible in night satellite images. Flaring is when excess natural gas from oil wells is burned off, rather than trapped and re-sold. As Express-News reporter Jennifer Hiller [recently explained](#), the new requirements only apply to equipment and new wells, not existing ones. Beyond this, the regulations won't apply to oil wells where it's not technically possible to capture natural gas and other hydrocarbons, which would apply to much of the Eagle Ford.

The exemption for technical reasons is understandable, but more needs to be done to address methane leaks from existing wells. Existing infrastructure is likely a major contributor to methane leaks. A recent [study](#) in the journal [Environmental Science & Technology](#), for example, found facilities that collect and gather natural gas from well sites have been emitting methane at a rate much greater than the EPA has estimated. The emissions, the study said, were equal to the 20-year climate impact of 37 coal-fired plants.

The EPA stats on this have long been considered artificially low. Why? Because the EPA inventory relied on industry-provided data. As Texas A&M University atmospheric science professor Gunnar Schade [has explained](#), "EPA's oil- and gas-related methane inventory, which largely relies on industry-provided input data, has been known for years to be at odds with measured atmospheric abundances of methane."

Methane is a key contributor to climate change. It's the second-most prevalent greenhouse gas after carbon dioxide. Its lifetime is short, only about 12 years, while carbon dioxide will linger for thousands of years. But reducing methane emissions is key as it traps heat at a rate 25 times greater than carbon dioxide. Reducing human methane emissions could buy valuable time in the global effort to reduce human carbon dioxide emissions.

Methane is a byproduct of oil production — and a pollutant that has environmental and health impacts. Proper handling of it should be viewed as the cost of normal business practice.

