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EPA's methane rules are a good first step

It's been two years since Colorado adopted rules aimed at reducing methane emissions from oil and gas facilities, and now the federal government is beginning to catch up.

The Environmental Protection Agency this month released final regulations to control leaks of methane gas from new oil and gas wells, and the Bureau of Land Management will finalize rules for wells under its jurisdiction later this summer.

Both agencies are moving in the right direction. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas, and yet it can be controlled without excessive burden on the industry, as Colorado is proving. And the economics of detecting methane leaks from storage tanks, pneumatic devices, pipelines and other equipment is only going to get more cost-effective in coming years. In fact, Colorado's experience suggests the EPA could have gone further, since this state's methane rules are stronger in two respects. First, Colorado's rules affect both new and existing facilities (EPA plans to address existing facilities in future rule-making). Second, the state has a tiered system in which most wells are inspected quarterly with some as often as once a month, depending on how much they produce. The EPA mostly requires semiannual inspections. And frequency matters, since leaks can spring up at any time. It's just not possible to predict when, for example, a seal on a tank hatch might be vulnerable.

Dan Grossman, director of state programs for the Environmental Defense Fund and a former Colorado lawmaker, says the EPA and BLM regulations are important because while some states are following Colorado's example in tackling methane, others — including Texas and North Dakota — are not.

And yet, he maintains, "this is the best bargain" both for air quality and greenhouse gas abatement among potential regulatory strategies. And repairing leaks actually increases the supply of natural gas, offsetting some of the regulatory cost.

Since Colorado adopted its methane rules, the Air Pollution Control Division has determined "the state has seen about a 75 percent decline in the number of sites that require fixes," Colorado Public Radio recently reported. And that percentage is only going to grow as the ability to detect leaks improves.

Patrick Von Barga of the Center for Methane Emissions Solutions, a trade group for companies engaged in leak detection and repair, told The Denver Post recently that he believes detection technology will become dramatically cheaper in a few years. While today's hand-held wands and infrared gas imaging cameras are effective, the hope is that spectrometer technology will produce smaller, light and accurate detection devices.

Eventually permanent surveillance for well leaks may become a cost-effective proposition.

Von Barga points out that Colorado already is headquarters to dozens of companies in the leak detection and repair business, and that this number is likely to increase given the new federal rules and the likelihood that other countries will tackle methane emissions as well. That is another benefit of Colorado acting first.