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NASA Study adds fuel to rules on methane leaks

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A new NASA-led study has found 25 primary sources of a 2,500-square-mile cloud of methane half the size of Delaware that hangs over the Four Corners and can be seen from space. In fact, satellite images of it in 2014 prompted the study.

NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, joined by researchers from the California Institute of Technology, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Michigan, pinpointed the sources in an article published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The bottom line of the NASA study is that 25 points of emission – gas wells, storage tanks, pipelines and processing plants – are responsible for about one-fourth of all the methane leaking into the atmosphere over the Four Corners.

And the point of a new Environmental Protection Agency rule, forthcoming Bureau of Land Management regulations and the NASA study is not to shut down oil and gas production, but to monitor equipment and mend leaks that likely hurt industry bottom lines as much as the environment.

Industry reps say more study is needed, that natural methane seeps from the Fruitland Formation, and the region's topography traps emissions and causes methane to build up over time. Yet the NASA study attributes the majority of methane emissions to oil and natural gas production, and natural gas processing and transmission.

Specifically, 232 million metric ton carbon dioxide equivalent in 2014. Enteric fermentation – the digestive process of ruminant animals – was second, with 164 million metric ton carbon dioxide equivalent. Landfills were third with 148, coal mining fourth at 68, manure management fifth with 61, and “other” with 57.

Thomas Singer, senior policy adviser with the Western Environmental Law Center, says the NASA study “shows the hotspot is from natural gas production. ... It refutes industry claims that other sources like landfills or natural seeps are responsible.” New Mexico Oil and Gas Association vice president Wally Drangmeister says “a whole lot of additional studies are needed before we can say massive policy changes are called for in the San Juan Basin.”

More information is good. But, in the meantime, there is good reason to use the information in hand.