

Methane rules to clear the cloud

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A cloud hangs over New Mexico around the Four Corners area. It's 2,500 square miles of methane, the size of the state of Delaware and the highest concentration of this heat-trapping pollution anywhere in the U.S. That's a lot of gas.

NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientists have discovered that much of the cloud originates because of the production, processing and distribution of oil and natural gas (methane is the primary component of natural gas). Flying over 1,200 square miles of the San Juan Basin, the study authors found more than 250 high-emitting sites. Many polluters were oil and gas facilities (there are natural leaks in the area from geological strata that contain coal and other organic matter, but they don't seem to be the source of the bulk of the methane).

Researchers further found that the high-emitters — 10 percent — were responsible for more than half of the emissions identified. Even reports from the industry indicated that oil and gas sources are responsible for some 80 percent of methane pollution in the San Juan Basin. That's a lot of pollution.

It's more than our share really, since the San Juan Basin is responsible for just 4 percent of total natural gas production in the country but 17 percent of the nation's overall natural gas waste on federal and tribal lands. All told, nearly a third of methane wasted on public and tribal lands takes place right here in New Mexico.

Methane, one of the worst greenhouse gases, contains benzene and other cancer-causing agents. By controlling the emissions, humans can slow climate change. Reducing emissions also would save energy and dollars. In 2013, New Mexico lost some \$100 million in natural gas from venting, flaring and leaks on oil and gas sites on federal and tribal land, according to ICF International. That's millions in lost revenue for the state, money we cannot afford to lose given New Mexico's dire budget situation.

Such waste is bad for the planet, the state's pocketbook and for the people who live in the Four Corners area and breathe in the cloud.

With new rules about methane waste issued earlier this year by the Environmental Protection Agency for private lands (lawsuits are pending, of course) and rules for federal and tribal lands being formulated by the Bureau of Land Management, the cloud of methane could be on its way out. The BLM rules — designed to reduce natural gas waste from "flaring, venting and leaks from oil and gas production" — are scheduled for adoption by November. Adoption before the election is important so a new president cannot reduce regulation necessary to control this pollution.

As is often the case with regulation, the industry affected does not welcome the rules. Rather than continuing to fight these common-sense regulations, industry leaders should begin adapting. It's the early adapters, after all, who can create new jobs and find new ways to profit. These changes will reduce

the methane cloud, a necessity if the United States is going to be serious about fighting climate change. The BLM estimates its rules are roughly the equivalent of eliminating greenhouse gas emissions from 860,000 to 890,000 vehicles. The rule's net benefits, the BLM says, could range from \$115 million to \$188 million a year, both in new revenues for operators from selling captured natural gas and in benefits because of reduced pollution.

Colorado's state regulations already are cutting back on waste. There, regulations require oil and gas producers to install equipment that minimizes leakage and controls or captures 95 percent of emissions. Energy producers must routinely inspect well sites for leaks; any leaks that are discovered must be fixed within 15 days. What works in Colorado can work just over the border in New Mexico. Eventually, New Mexico could put its own state regulations in place if federal rules being implemented don't reduce the cloud quickly enough.

We all recognize that the oil and gas industry is hurting, with production down and revenues plummeting. Troubles in the oil patch are why the state budget is in disarray. Local governments and citizens, on the other hand, understand that controlling methane waste is not just a cost, it's an investment. The investment will bring new jobs to corral the leaks, fix the wells and to otherwise stem the pollution. Methane that is captured rather than leaked to the cloud can be turned into profit. Less pollution eventually will lead to lower health costs, saving money a different way.

From the city of Santa Fe to Santa Fe County to big oil and gas-producing counties such as Rio Arriba, our public bodies are making it clear they don't want to waste energy. Top government officials, mainly Democrats, also want tough rules. Environmentalists are on board, but so are business owners, public health groups and tribal voices.

New Mexicans understand that it's wrong to waste resources and pollute the air. Here's to strong federal rules, strong enough to decimate the cloud and capture waste — for the good of everyone, even the oil and gas industry.