

THE HILL



Pennsylvania shows EPA the way on pending methane policy
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Speaking to a petroleum industry audience in Houston recently, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator [Gina McCarthy](#) said, “we can and we must do more to reduce methane emissions in the oil and gas sector.” McCarthy has it right. Uncontrolled leaking and venting of natural gas wastes a valuable resource and threatens our climate. Last week, as part of a joint announcement with Canada, the administration said it plans to move forward on a solution.

For a blueprint on solving this problem, EPA should take a look at Pennsylvania, where Gov. Tom Wolf (D) recently proposed comprehensive new methane emissions standards for oil and gas companies in his state.

Methane, the main ingredient in natural gas, packs 84 times the warming power of carbon dioxide for the first 20 years it is in the atmosphere. It accounts for one quarter of the human-caused warming we are currently experiencing. And our biggest opportunity for methane reductions comes from the oil-and-gas sector.

In Pennsylvania alone, operators released at least 97,000 metric tons of methane in 2014, though officials say the real figure could easily be eight times higher. In fact, if just one percent of the natural gas produced in the state is escaping — and experts say that’s a lowball — then Pennsylvania companies could be emitting close to 780,000 metric tons of methane a year, and throwing away saleable product worth over \$125 million.

To fix the problem, Pennsylvania is proposing better controls and more frequent monitoring and repair for wells, pipelines, compressors and other infrastructure. Most importantly, new rules will include the more than 5,000 wells and facilities that are already operating. Including existing sources is a critical benchmark, because they will continue to be responsible for the vast majority of emissions for many years to come.

Pennsylvania is no stranger to fossil fuels. Its coal powered the industrial revolution, its innovators drilled the world’s first oil well, and now it’s America’s second largest gas producer, after Texas. Today, the state understands that oil and gas production carries a responsibility to deal with the impacts that follow.

Far from wanting to punish producers, Wolf, who campaigned on the need for new methane rules, says they are meant to help the industry maintain viability without compromising environmental performance.

By contrast, the federal government has, until now, been unwilling to apply the same common-sense policies at the national level to companies currently releasing at least 9.3 million metric tons of methane a year according to EPA's latest draft inventory – even though cutting these emissions is one of the fastest, most cost-effective ways to achieve the Obama administration's climate protection goals.

As they move forward, Washington could stand to learn from Pennsylvania, as well as from Colorado, another major oil and gas producer, which enacted similar policies three years ago (with active support of both industry and environmental advocates).

The White House last week reiterated its goal to cut oil and gas methane emissions 40-45 percent below 2012 levels by 2025. Last year, EPA released draft rules covering new emitters, but didn't touch tens of thousands of existing facilities. Now that's about to change. By contrast, rules just proposed by the Bureau of Land Management do apply to both new and existing sources on federal and tribal land. In 2013, those facilities released enough gas to heat 1.5 million homes for a year. But BLM covers only a fraction of U.S. production (14 percent of natural gas, 9 percent of oil). There's absolutely no reason EPA shouldn't follow states like Pennsylvania and Colorado, as well as its sister agency.

Some in industry says they can't afford new regulations with today's low oil and gas prices. But short-term market conditions don't excuse cutting corners on emissions, especially when the solutions are such a bargain. Recent studies by ICF show that methane leaks can be reduced at least 40 percent at an average cost of just one penny per thousand cubic feet of gas produced—about one-half of 1 percent of today's price for that much gas.

The payoff is huge: At global scale, stopping 45 percent of methane leakage would help the climate over the next 20 years as much as shutting down one-third of the world's coal-fired power plants.

Methane is both a local and national problem that requiring robust detection and repair of leaks. Achieving this it isn't hard or costly, but it does require commitment from both the state and federal levels. The Obama administration should use its final year to make sure we get it right.

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