

THE DAILY SENTINEL

EPA's methane rule is a mixed blessing

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Energy companies throughout the country will have to restrict methane emissions from any future drilling of oil and gas wells after new regulations the Environmental Protection Agency released Thursday aimed at curbing climate change.

The good news is that Colorado was ahead of the curve on this issue, having implemented the nation's first rules specifically targeting methane emissions in 2014. So, the federal rule won't have the same kind of disruptive effect here as elsewhere.

The bad news? Well, the industry says it's just more bureaucratic red tape that stifles innovation and discourages investment in new technologies to prevent methane leaks.

The EPA "should focus on enforcing existing laws rather than promulgating new overreaching rules and regulations that stifle job creation and responsible energy production that Congress did not approve or pass," said U.S. Rep. Scott Tipton, R-Cortez. He said the new rule will have a "negligible" impact on air quality.

Here's where the congressman seems to be missing the boat. If the industry is actively trying to stem methane losses, why would it oppose a rule leading them there? The rule actually helps the industry buttress its claims of developing resources responsibly, which in turn, raises the profile of natural gas as a viable alternative to the burning of coal. Mitigating methane can only help in making the case for the Jordan Cove project.

Methane is a particularly potent greenhouse gas, with heat-trapping properties 25 times that of carbon dioxide, though it does not last nearly as long in the atmosphere. The EPA said the methane cuts — 510,000 tons of methane in 2025 — would be equivalent to cutting 11 million metric tons of carbon dioxide.

The BLM is pondering a similar rule for oil and gas development involving federal lands or minerals. The two agencies have differing congressional mandates. Instead of regulating methane as a pollutant as the EPA does, the BLM looks at it as a wasted public resource. If the BLM's rule over methane waste — which would include all sources, not just new drilling — is implemented, the industry and the local and state governments that rely on revenues from oil and gas production both stand to benefit. Colorado's rules arose from recommendations of both environmentalists and producers. Capturing methane carries a certain cost. BLM leak detection and repair provisions would be offset by more gas into gas lines and more royalties paid to state coffers. It's a net positive impact for all parties.

Because Colorado, and now the EPA, have passed methane-control rules, it seems likely the BLM will follow suit with a final rule of its own. We'll probably hear more industry grumbling if it does, but we don't see a big downside. The Colorado rules — formed with industry input — worked well enough to inspire a national standard that should help the industry's reputation as a responsible player.

