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New methane regulation clears air

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The decade-old Marcellus Shale natural gas industry in Pennsylvania has helped to drive down greenhouse gas emissions across the state.

It's also a national trend as more and more utilities shift their preferred electricity generation fuel from coal to natural gas and as renewable energy continues to gain market share.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, carbon dioxide emissions by the energy sector in 2015 were 12 percent lower than in 2005, even though the economy was 15 percent larger in 2015. The EIA said the country used 15 percent less energy per unit of gross domestic product and produced 23 percent fewer energy-related CO2 emissions per unit than in 2005.

Yet the shift to natural gas does not ensure progress against climate change because it is unclear just how much methane leaks into the atmosphere from gas drilling, processing, storage, transportation and distribution.

Methane is far less abundant than CO2 and it does not last as long in the atmosphere. But it is up to 25 times more effective at trapping heat in the atmosphere over a 100-year period, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The agency identifies natural gas and petroleum systems as the largest source of the gas.

In January, the Wolf administration established a comprehensive methane-reduction plan for the gas industry, which reverberated nationally because Pennsylvania is the nation's second-largest producer of natural gas.

Now, the EPA has followed up with a long-anticipated national rule that aims to reduce the industry's methane emissions to 40 percent below 2012 levels by 2025 — by 510,000 tons a year, the amount of methane produced by about 10 coal-fueled power plants.

The reductions can be achieved with existing technology. That will result in additional costs, but also in the industry having much more methane to sell.

This is a case in which the country can have the benefits of a strong gas industry and of reduced greenhouse gas emissions. State and federal governments should make the rule work with strong monitoring and enforcement.