

Who wants more methane - Denton Record-Chronicle (TX) - September 2, 2019 - page 4

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President Donald Trump's Environmental Protection Agency moved Thursday to lift limits on potent greenhouse gas emissions from the drilling and transportation of natural gas, a major fuel source for electric power plants, heating systems and industrial processes. Not only would this be bad for the environment, but it might well do more harm than good for the fossil-fuel industry.

The United States has enjoyed an energy revolution over the past decade as **hydraulic fracturing** and horizontal-drilling technologies unlocked huge amounts of domestically produced natural gas. The massive new supply of fuel has driven down gas prices and helped it displace coal, which is the worst environmental villain in the electricity sector. When natural gas is burned in power plants, it emits roughly half the heat-trapping carbon dioxide that burning coal produces and minuscule amounts of the noxious chemicals and particulates that sicken those living nearby.

But there is a very big catch. Natural gas is mostly methane. When allowed to waft into the atmosphere uncombusted, methane is an extremely potent greenhouse agent on its own. Though it lingers in the atmosphere for less time than carbon dioxide, methane is about 80 times more capable a heat-trapper over a 20-year time span. If one takes seriously expert warnings about avoiding dangerous near-term climate tipping points, after which temperatures could enter an upward spiral, restraining methane emissions is a key climate goal.

So when methane leaks from natural gas wells, storage tanks or pipelines, the fuel's environmental impact suddenly looks much worse. Researchers, industry groups and federal standard-setters have debated how big a problem methane leakage is and how much it detracts from the appeal of natural gas as a bridge fuel between fossil fuels and renewables. But substantial recent research suggests that the country's methane leakage rate has been much higher than the federal estimates that had made natural gas look like an environmental and economic miracle. Natural gas producers could argue that breakneck coal-to-gas switching had driven down official power-sector emissions estimates over the past decade. But it was becoming harder to accept that the environmental benefits were as pronounced.

That is why the industry should have welcomed President Barack Obama's moves to require methane emissions control in natural gas production and transportation, rules that came into force in 2016. In fact, several major fossil-fuel players have embraced the regulations. For relatively inexpensive upgrades and procedures that enable natural gas producers to capture and sell more product, the rules allowed the industry to argue that methane leakage across the industry would be minimized and that natural gas could be, at least for a time, part of a serious climate strategy.

Yet others opposed the new rules. This is no surprise, given recent research on methane leakage, which found massive leaks from relatively few "superemitters" in the business. The regulations would have hit bad actors hardest; the bad actors did not like that. And the Trump administration just sided with them.

The EPA's proposal would substantially weaken the Obama-era rules and keep natural gas's reputation tarnished - all to save the industry a mere \$17 million to \$19 million a year. It is counterproductive in every conceivable sense.

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