

Oil and gas industry must cut dangerous methane releases

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Natural gas, the fuel many Americans use daily to cook meals and heat our homes, is made mostly of methane. Natural gas also comes with a “cleaner than coal” reputation when burned to generate electricity.

But too many leaks in the supply chain can quickly overwhelm this advantage, as it has in the Four Corners region, and solutions are desperately needed.

The Four Corners made national headlines last year when NASA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and top university scientists detected a 2,500-square-mile methane “hot spot” so intense that initial satellite readings were thought to be in error.

Sadly, the hot spot is real and covers more than twice the area of Bernalillo County. While the study detected the hot spot, it did not identify exactly where the methane is coming from.

Determining exactly where methane is released into the atmosphere is important. But we already know that oil and gas operations are responsible for the lion’s share of methane in the Four Corners. The region hosts more than 20,000 active oil and gas wells, thousands of miles of oil and gas pipelines, processing plants, and other infrastructure.

According to EPA’s Greenhouse Gas Reporting Program, in which oil and gas companies self-report their emissions, the industry accounts for almost 90 percent of methane emissions in the Four Corners.

This leak-related methane waste from oil and gas robs the public of millions of dollars in royalties that could be funding education, health and public safety. Unburned methane is also a major climate pollutant 86 times more potent than carbon dioxide over a 20-year time span.

The Four Corners methane plume causes as much greenhouse gas pollution in a year as seven to 13 coal-fired power plants or as much as 14 times the annual emissions of New Mexico’s 700,000 cars.

Methane emissions also contribute to serious ozone problems and public health risks, including increased respiratory illnesses. This waste also leads to more drilling, which puts stress on nearby communities.

It’s important to learn more about where all this methane is coming from. To follow up on their initial findings, NASA and NOAA scientists are back in the field to better pinpoint sources of methane contributing to the hot spot.

They’re looking at existing wells and new drilling, compressor stations, natural gas processing plants, and sources outside the oil and gas industry as well. The lead scientists for the new studies will describe their work at a public forum to be held at San Juan College in Farmington on Friday. We applaud this work.

However, ongoing research must not be an obstacle to addressing the methane pollution and waste that the industry itself acknowledges it’s causing in the region. Tools and techniques to clean up the Four Corners methane plume are readily available and often cost-effective, but the industry isn’t solving the problem on its own.

Voluntary programs to reduce methane leaks are not working: out of over 475 oil and gas producers in New Mexico, only 10 participate in the Environmental Protection Agency’s voluntary Natural Gas Star Program.

The Environmental Protection Agency and the Bureau of Land Management are moving ahead with a solution: rules to require the oil and gas industry to remedy leaks in old equipment, use state-of-the-art technologies in new operations and end sloppy practices.

These new rules will make sure that all oil and gas companies take sensible action to reduce methane waste and pollution. They will ensure New Mexico is paid the royalties that should be collected for energy resources developed on our public lands.

Late last month, we met with officials at the White House and at the Department of Interior to press the case for common-sense EPA and BLM methane rules. We will continue fighting for these protections and help enforce them on the ground when they take effect.

They will speed cleanup of the Four Corners hot spot, and we need them – now.

Also signed by Lori Goodman, interim director, Dinè CARE; and Glenn Schiffbauer, executive director, Santa Fe Chapter NM Green Chamber of Commerce.