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POLLUTION

It's Time for Obama to Tighten Rules on Gas Leaks

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Environmental groups with varied stances on the merits of natural gas and the controversial extraction method best known as fracking have endorsed a set of cost-effective steps the Obama administration could take to stanch gas leaks from wells and other gas and oil facilities. Such emissions contribute to harmful local air pollution and — because the main constituent of natural gas is heat-trapping methane — global warming.

The steps are laid out in “Waste Not: Common Sense Ways to Reduce Methane Pollution from the Oil and Natural Gas Industry,” the summary of a forthcoming report aimed at shaping new standards for methane pollution that the Environmental Protection Agency is expected to issue later this year.

The report summary was prepared by the Clean Air Task Force, Natural Resources Defense Council and Sierra Club and has been endorsed by the Environmental Defense Fund, Earthworks and Earth Justice.

Ever since I reported in 2009 on ways to cut wasteful, polluting releases of natural gas from drilling operations, I've been posting on the wisdom of improving industry standards and federal rules on emissions from gas wells and other oil and gas facilities. Here's video I posted in 2009 that shows the glaring nature of the problem, and opportunity:

Hopefully the administration will read and heed this advice.

Here are some of the report's main findings:

The oil and gas industry is the nation's largest industrial source of methane, a much more potent climate-warming pollutant than carbon dioxide pound-for-pound, and the oil and gas sector is the second largest industrial contributor to overall climate pollution.

Moreover, there is compelling evidence that the industry is releasing a lot more methane than is currently accounted for in government inventories.

EPA could reduce the sector's methane pollution in half in a just few years by issuing nationwide methane standards that require common sense, low-cost pollution controls for the sector's top emitting sources:

- Regular leak detection and repair programs can reduce methane pollution by an estimated 1,700,000 to 1,800,000 metric tons per year. EPA standards should require oil and natural gas companies to control leaks from all equipment at wellpads, gas processing plants, compressor stations, and large aboveground distribution facilities by regularly carrying out these inspections.

- Cleaning up older equipment—compressors and gas-driven pneumatic equipment—with proven technologies and practices can reduce methane pollution by an estimated 1,200,000 to 1,350,000 metric tons per year. Current EPA standards require these technologies and practices for some new compressors and gas-driven pneumatic equipment in select segments of the industry, while states like Colorado extend some requirements to existing sources. EPA should set additional standards that require the same practices for all such equipment—both new and existing—throughout the industry.

- Capturing natural gas that would otherwise be released from oil and gas wells can reduce methane pollution by an estimated 260,000 to 500,000 metric tons per year. EPA standards should require well operators to capture this gas and sell it or use it on-site, instead of releasing it or flaring it. The methane abatement potentials shown above are conservative estimates based on government inventories. They don't account for the research indicating that actual emissions could be twice the inventory estimates, or

higher. The problem and the upsides of controlling it—are likely much greater.

The standards we recommend in this report would also significantly reduce emissions of other air pollutants, specifically smog-forming volatile organic compounds and toxic pollutants like benzene that cause cancer and are associated with a host of other health problems. The cost of the recommended standards would be low— less than one percent of the industry's sales revenue. EPA should issue specific methane standards for the sources described above, including standards for new and existing equipment and practices. Methane standards would cut up to ten times more methane and four times more smog-forming pollutants compared to other policy approaches available to EPA, because more sources would be reached.

Here's another link to the document. The full set of technical findings and recommendations will be published in coming weeks, the groups said.