



How to help our kids breathe easy

By Lynn Goldman

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(CNN) Maile's family lives in North Texas at the southern end of "Tornado Alley," perched atop the gas-infused Barnett Shale. A noisy pumping station and gas well loom just 450 feet from one side of their home, and another well operates 750 feet away on the other side. She says her 7-year-old son was diagnosed with asthma and suffers frequent attacks and nosebleeds. She hopes he will grow out of it, but she worries he won't as long as they stay sandwiched between gas industry operations.

This is not just Maile's problem. An [estimated 15 million Americans](#) live within one mile of an active or recently active oil and gas well. These families see firsthand that unconventional natural gas development is a heavy industrial activity even when it takes place in a residential or rural community. Living in close proximity to such activity poses significant public health and environmental risks.

Last week, the American Lung Association released its latest "[State of the Air](#)" report, a national report card of air quality in the U.S. The overall picture shows that state and federal efforts to improve air quality are working -- most of the nation is breathing cleaner air than a decade ago. But in areas of intense drilling activity, like rural Sublette County in Wyoming and Washington County in the Marcellus Shale region of Southwest Pennsylvania, ozone pollution is a serious problem.

Children are at particular risk from this kind of air pollution since they often play outdoors and because their lungs are still growing. [Nearly 3.1 million children with asthma](#) live in an area of the country with a failing grade for at least one air pollutant. For them, poor air quality means more school days missed and more physical activities curtailed.



The downtown skyline of Los Angeles is enveloped in smog shortly before sunset on 17 November 17, 2006.

The report helps illustrate the consequences of rushing to develop oil and gas resources without the effective oversight to protect the public health. Drilling operators are subject to shockingly few air pollution standards. It is also increasingly apparent, according to a number of [scientific studies](#), that state and federal reports on air pollutants and greenhouse gases underestimate oil and gas sector emissions.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [plans to propose rules this summer](#) that should close the gap between unfettered drilling and its side effects. These rules will target methane leaks that occur across oil and natural gas operations. Methane is the main component of natural gas, and methane pollution poses a twofold threat to clean air: other air pollutants that compromise air quality, like smog-forming volatile organic compounds, leak when methane escapes, while increased warming caused by methane emissions further exacerbates air pollution.

A close look at [emissions data from the oil and gas sector](#) makes the case for new EPA rules: The [latest EPA Greenhouse Gas Inventory](#) reported that methane emissions were up nearly across the board, increasing in the latest inventory compared to the previous year. They were down in only one section of the natural gas supply chain, which happens to include the part of the supply chain targeted by a 2012 EPA rule to curb air pollution.

The good news is, air pollution standards have proven effective at reducing methane emissions in targeted areas. But right now, there are still too many gaps allowing air pollution to leak from oil and gas operations. New EPA methane rules can help close that gap and make domestic energy production cleaner and more efficient. After all, preventing the loss of methane means more natural gas in the pipeline.

We would be smart to regard "State of the Air" as a warning sign of the growing gap between our abundant oil and natural gas production and the dearth of industry oversight. As the air pollution problem shifts from urban areas to the countryside, we need clean air rules to adapt to this changing landscape.

More importantly, new EPA rules would help Maile's 7-year-old and others to start to breathe easy again.

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