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Editorial: Texas' wasteful methane habits

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Texas environmental regulators have an opportunity to show leadership on controlling methane emissions from natural gas production. If they don't step up, they'll have no one else to blame when the federal government steps in with a one-size-fits-all policy.

Natural gas is a cleaner alternative to oil and coal, but it also produces methane, a greenhouse gas that arguably is a greater contributor to climate change than carbon dioxide. While the warming impacts of carbon dioxide buildup take longer to reverse, methane leaks are more intense and warm the atmosphere 80 times as fast as carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide will heat the planet; methane leaks will heat it faster.

As the nation's biggest gas-producing state, Texas is responsible for about 30 percent of the nation's methane emissions, much of them from leaky pipes and valves along the gas production and storage process.

So far, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has stayed on the sidelines instead of working with the industry and environmentalists to reduce this waste. That's a big mistake. The federal government is expected to produce rules on methane emissions within a few months. It is in the best interests of Texans that the oil and gas industry, environmentalists and regulators beat Washington to the punch in the hopes of influencing federal rules.

Texas doesn't have to look far for examples of forward-thinking state leadership. Colorado this year became the first state to require the oil and gas industry to monitor and fix leaky valves and other points that could allow methane to escape. Wyoming, Ohio and Pennsylvania — other states with gigantic gas-producing fields — have followed Colorado's example.

In Texas, these simple steps to prevent methane leakage would have the same environmental impact as shuttering 13 coal-fired power plants and would add virtually nothing to the overall price of natural gas, says the Environmental Defense Fund, a market-based environmental group.

As a major oil and gas producer, Texas has an obligation to be part of the solution. Now it must show the will. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality should require companies to reduce methane emissions even without new federal legislation. Isn't it just good stewardship to require energy companies to monitor their operations for leaks and replace faulty equipment?

The TCEQ and incoming Gov. Greg Abbott, a preacher of Texas-based solutions, should show executive leadership and get ahead of the federal government.

Advanced drilling techniques have unlocked tons of natural gas trapped in shale formations, cut energy costs and encouraged investments in the U.S. energy industry. It would be unforgivable for Texas to fail to make a few simple fixes and relinquish those advantages.

THE PRICE OF WASTE

Texas leads the nation in natural gas production ... and natural gas waste:

Texas was responsible for more than 600,000 metric tons, or 30 percent, of the nation's methane emissions from oil and gas operations last year.

Natural gas lost to production leaks in Texas could power 750,000 homes for a year.

Wasted natural gas costs the Texas economy more than \$100 million annually.

SOURCE: Environmental Defense Fund

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