

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Houston Chronicle Editorial: Plug the leaks

About 600,000 tons of methane gas leaked into the Texas atmosphere last year.

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Years ago, Houston's oilman Jim West, nicknamed "Silver Dollar Jim" for his habit of gleefully tossing silver dollars at passersby on the street, enjoyed throwing away money, but most oil and gas entrepreneurs these days would prefer to find their fun elsewhere. But throwing away money is exactly what they're doing when they ignore emissions of methane, the primary component of oil and gas.

"What they're leaking is the product they ought to sell," [Jim Marston](#), an [Environmental Defense Fund](#) vice president, told the Chronicle editorial board recently. "Texas lost 600,000 tons of methane last year."

Unlike Silver Dollar Jim's coins, which most likely didn't hurt anybody who got hit, methane emissions from faulty pipe fittings, wells or storage tanks are a serious problem. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas, and when it leaks into the atmosphere it absorbs the sun's heat 80 times more intensely than carbon dioxide. A recent Environmental Defense Fund study found that 25 percent of man-made global warming is caused by methane emissions.

Fortunately, the methane-emission problem is beginning to get the attention it deserves. In February, Colorado adopted a set of air regulations, the first in the nation to directly address methane pollution. North Dakota, Wyoming and Ohio now have similar rules. Texas, which leads the nation both in oil and gas production and in methane emissions, does not.

"If you don't solve the problem in Texas, you haven't solved the problem," Marston said.

Marston said his organization is working with a number of Texas companies to address the methane problem voluntarily, including [Southwestern Energy and Anadarko Petroleum](#) Corp., but a piecemeal approach, although better than nothing, is not the best solution. The [Texas Commission on Environmental Quality](#), with support from Governor-elect [Greg Abbott](#) and the Texas Legislature, needs to enact rules requiring companies to monitor for methane leaks and replace equipment prone to leakage. Otherwise, Abbott's favorite foil during his tenure as attorney general, the Obama administration, will step in and do what needs to be done.

Abbott and other state lawmakers can grouse all they want about federal-government overreach, but if they're unwilling to help prevent the worst impacts of climate change, then they have to be prepared for a D.C. response to the most critical long-term challenge the world faces.