

'Moment of Truth' on Emissions

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In March, the Obama administration issued a white paper as part of its Climate Action Plan entitled “Strategy to Reduce Methane Emissions.” A big part of the strategy was built around cutting down on the methane emissions that result from oil and gas production, particularly the hydraulic fracturing method of extracting natural gas from the ground — a.k.a., fracking. In the white paper, the administration said that the Environmental Protection Agency would decide by the fall how best to go about it.

Fall is now here. More to the point, the word is that the E.P.A. and the White House are in the process of deciding what tack to take in reducing methane emissions (though any announcement will probably have to wait until after the November elections). If the administration takes the right course, methane emissions could likely be reduced by 40 percent or 50 percent over the next five years — enough to make natural gas a genuinely cleaner alternative to coal and a critical component in reducing greenhouse gasses. But if it doesn't — if the government decides to back away from regulation, or allow industry to reduce emissions voluntarily — then the promise of natural gas as a cleaner fuel could well go unrealized.

“It's the moment of truth,” says Fred Krupp, the president of the

Environmental Defense Fund and a strong proponent of regulating emissions.

Methane emissions, as I've written before, are fracking's Achilles' heel. Methane is the primary ingredient in natural gas, and, when it is burned, it is considerably less dirty than coal. The problem is that methane too often leaks at various points in the production and distribution process. And when methane gets into the atmosphere, it is 84 to 86 times more powerful than carbon dioxide over a 20-year span. (After two decades, its potency is greatly reduced.) Not surprisingly, anti-fracking environmentalists have put methane leakage near the top of the list of their reasons that fracking should be banned altogether.

That, to be blunt, is never going to happen. The natural gas boom that has resulted from fracking has become hugely important to the American economy, providing jobs and a plentiful supply of a low-cost fuel. President Obama himself is on record as being pro-natural gas.

It also turns out that lowering methane emissions does not require enormously expensive new technology. It can be done with technology that already exists and at fairly minimal cost. I've seen estimates that it would add a penny to the current price of natural gas. What's more, a 50 percent reduction in methane emissions is the equivalent to closing 90 coal-fired power plants, according to the Environmental Defense Fund.

In February, Colorado became the first state in the nation to impose regulations on the natural gas industry aimed at reducing methane emissions. The regulations included using valves that don't allow methane to leak, regular checks and repairs of leaks and a variety of other rules. Four of the largest natural gas developers in the state supported the regulations — in part because they saw the public relations value in it, but also because the regulations Colorado imposed made sense. "What we were looking for were rules that wouldn't just add paperwork or documentation but would make a quantifiable difference," said Doug Hock, a spokesman for the Encana Corporation, one of

the companies that supported the regulations. He noted that the company was already using, in Wyoming, a special infrared camera that detects methane leaks — which is now required by Colorado — and “we could see the benefit of the rules.” He added, “It really puts a very disciplined process around regular maintenance.”

The problem, however, is that while fracking is currently regulated by the states, not every state is rushing to follow Colorado’s lead. What’s more, there are an enormous number of companies in the fracking business — literally thousands. Fracking practically screams out for federal regulation.

Which brings me back to the White House. President Obama has said that he wants to put in place policies that will lower greenhouse gasses by 17 percent by the year 2020. To that end, in 2012, he set fuel mileage standards that will increase fuel economy to more than 50 miles per gallon by 2025. More recently, the E.P.A. announced rules that would reduce carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants by 30 percent by the year 2030. The environmentalists I spoke with say that these moves, while significant, won’t get the president — or the nation — to that 17 percent goal. But adding methane emission regulation could well get us over the goal line.

Is industry pushing back? Of course. But oil and gas companies should be welcoming sensible regulation. There is so much mistrust of fracking in the country that rules that made the process demonstrably safer could well have the effect of ameliorating some of that mistrust.

Smart regulation to reduce methane emissions could help industry — and help the planet as well.

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