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Editorial Reducing methane is a wise short-term win

By THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD

For too long, carbon dioxide has dominated the discussion of greenhouse gases; for the most part, it has been the discussion. That gas, emitted by the burning of fossil fuels, is, after all, the biggie in terms of volume. But this single-minded approach has meant that the so-called short-lived gases have been all but overlooked, and that's a mistake. There might be less of them in the atmosphere, but they are powerhouses when it comes to trapping heat.

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Methane, for example, is 80 times more potent at trapping heat than carbon dioxide for 20 years after it is released, and 20 times more potent over 100 years. Soot and refrigerants are similarly potent. In the long term, carbon is still the biggest threat, but there are tactical advantages to tackling the short-lived gases. The reports of the International Panel on Climate Change point to the necessity of dramatically curtailing greenhouse gas emissions over the next three decades; reducing methane and other short-lived gases gives by far the biggest bang for the short-term buck.

Methane is emitted by cattle, landfills and leaky natural-gas pipes, and the technology for reducing it is well within our grasp. Added bonus: Methane is fuel. Enough of it is lost through wells and leaky pipes in this country to power 6

million homes, according to the Environmental Defense Fund. Fracking is a major source of methane emissions as well. On Wednesday, President Obama announced plans to reduce methane emissions from oil and gas operations by 40% to 45% by the year 2025.

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Industry representatives say they don't need regulations because they already are working on the leaky-pipe problem. That may be true, but not all companies are good environmental stewards, and the nation needs more than voluntary safeguards in place to ensure that the effort continues, and at a pace that will make a serious difference.

Last year, Colorado took the lead in reducing methane emissions from oil and gas industries, through regulations that were drawn up with the cooperation of the energy industry and the Environmental Defense Fund. Now California Gov. Jerry Brown, in his sweeping new proposal for reducing greenhouse gases, is including methane and other short-lived climate pollutants as a significant part of his strategy. Among those is soot, a byproduct of the burning of fossil fuels, especially diesel. Cleaning up soot, also known as black carbon, is also expected to reduce heart and lung disease.

This attention to methane and other short-lived gases is overdue but welcome. Strong regulations on these heat trappers would help the U.S. meet important short-term climate goals, add to its energy resources and reduce harmful pollution.