



The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

A Modest Move on Methane

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD JAN. 19, 2015

There is much to like in the Obama administration’s proposal, announced last Wednesday, to reduce harmful methane emissions from oil and gas drilling. The proposal — which calls for detailed rules to be unveiled in early summer — is the first federal effort to directly regulate methane, the main component of natural gas and a major contributor to climate change. The regulations will apply to all new oil and gas wells, and be national in scope, thus setting minimum standards for what is now a patchwork quilt of state laws.

They will make a dent in the billions of cubic feet of gas that now escape unchecked into the atmosphere. But only a dent. Officials at the Environmental Protection Agency said their goal was to cut methane emissions by between 40 and 45 percent in the next decade, a laudable ambition. But rules that apply only to new facilities, as these do, won’t do the trick; over the next five years, 90 percent of methane emissions are expected to come from existing oil and gas operations.

The agency said it hoped for voluntary measures to modernize existing operations. But if history is any guide, mandatory regulation of some sort will almost certainly be necessary. The natural gas industry in particular has been alarmingly slow to clean up its act despite widespread public concern over the threats to air and water quality presented by the drilling technique known as hydraulic fracturing.

Methane accounts for about 9 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions in this country. But its chemical properties make it a more potent trapper of heat than carbon dioxide, by far the main greenhouse gas. Although methane

is also produced by agricultural operations and other sources like landfills, the easiest leaks to control are those that occur in the drilling and transmission of natural gas, and, to a lesser extent, oil. These emissions are expected to rise substantially as industry exploits new and old deposits through hydraulic fracturing and as the preferred fuel for power plants gradually shifts from coal to natural gas.

President Obama promised to address methane emissions last March as part of his broader climate action plan. Controlling methane is one of the last missing pieces of his climate strategy, which already includes much stronger fuel economy standards for vehicles and proposed rules governing carbon dioxide emissions from new and existing power plants. He cannot meet his pledge of reducing America's greenhouse gas emissions by 26 to 28 percent below 2005 levels by 2025 without tackling methane. Though inadequate, the new plan is a welcome and necessary step toward that goal.

Meet The New York Times's Editorial Board »

A version of this editorial appears in print on January 19, 2015, on page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: A Modest Move on Methane.