



A Potent, Overlooked Greenhouse Gas

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD NOV. 25, 2014

Five years ago in Copenhagen, President Obama pledged to reduce America's greenhouse gas emissions 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. In Beijing a few weeks ago, as part of a landmark agreement with China, he went one better by pledging a 26 percent to 28 percent cut by 2025. The first target will be hard to reach — and the second virtually impossible — without a determined effort on his part to cut methane emissions from the oil and gas industry.

Methane, the major component of natural gas, accounts for roughly 10 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions in this country, but its chemical properties make it a more potent heat-trapping gas in the short run than carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas. Although methane emissions are also produced by landfills and agricultural operations, the easiest to control are the methane leaks 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 continues to exploit old and new natural gas deposits through the drilling technique known as hydraulic fracturing.

Mr. Obama promised to address methane emissions in March as part of his Climate Action Plan, and the White House and Environmental Protection Agency are in the final stages of writing proposed regulations. The rules should be as tough as possible and national in scope. They can be administered by the states, as many are under the Clean Air Act, but they should be mandatory, not voluntary, as many in the industry have argued. And they should seek to control methane leaks at every stage of the process, including drilling and production at the wellhead, storage and transmission and distribution. As formidable as it sounds, a coalition of environmental groups estimates that emissions could be halved without any new technologies and at a cost of about 1 percent of industry revenues.

As a practical matter, controlling methane emissions is essential to realizing the climate-related advantages of natural gas. When burned in power plants, natural gas produces only about half the carbon dioxide of coal. But that advantage is reduced and could be erased altogether if methane emissions are not controlled.

What is mainly at issue here, of course, is the future of the planet. But also it's Mr. Obama's climate legacy, which already includes greatly increased automobile efficient standards and, assuming they survive court and congressional challenges, his proposed rules governing carbon dioxide emissions from power plants. Strong methane regulations could complete that legacy.

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