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Less hot air, less methane

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Some leaders of the gas and oil industry complained Wednesday, after President Obama announced new goals for methane reduction, that the administration has taken a regulatory approach rather than working cooperatively with the industry.

They contend that natural gas production has risen by 37 percent since 1990 as overall methane emissions have declined by 17 percent over the same period, demonstrating that the industry doesn't need government oversight.

But, as development of the vast Marcellus Shale gas field has demonstrated, all drillers are not equally conscientious relative to the environmental consequences of gas extraction.

Methane is a particular concern because it is a potent greenhouse gas. The administration noted Wednesday, while announcing its emission-reduction goals, that methane has 25 times the ability of carbon dioxide to trap heat in the atmosphere.

Mr. Obama announced a goal of a 45 percent reduction in methane emissions from drilling operations and finished wells by 2025.

That is reasonable because the technology is available to achieve it, and some drillers already are highly proficient at preventing methane leaks. Their best practices should be the minimum standard for all drillers, whether by regulation or their own initiative.

And the 45 percent figure is not as onerous as it could be. It will apply only to new wells. Those already drilled won't be covered, even if they continue to belch methane into the atmosphere.

Capturing methane also is in the industry's interest. Methane is the principal component of natural gas; the more they capture, the more they can sell. That's one reason that many drillers are meticulous about limiting emissions.

The standards should become universal.