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New rules could limit methane emissions' effects on the atmosphere

By Editorial Board

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THE OBAMA administration spent all summer [mulling new measures to cut air pollution from the booming natural gas industry](#). Now federal officials are nearing a decision on [whether and how to limit emissions](#) from wells, storage tanks and other places from which gas can leak. Whether you believe that the country's fracking boom is an economic godsend or an environmental disaster — or both — you should favor measures to limit the industry's effects on the atmosphere.

Unlocking vast natural gas reserves trapped in U.S. shale rock formations has drastically cut the cost and price volatility of the fuel in the United States. That has kept energy costs down, encouraged domestic and foreign manufacturers to invest here and reduced the burning of coal, a much dirtier fuel. On the other hand, natural gas produces some carbon dioxide emissions when burned — about half those of coal — and is a potent greenhouse gas in its own right when it escapes into the air unburned. That's because it contains a lot of methane, which, when allowed to escape uncombusted, is dozens of times more potent a warming agent than carbon dioxide. Methane from various sources now accounts for [9 percent](#) of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, and that number is rising with the expansion of domestic drilling.

Some environmentalists oppose any increase in natural-gas burning because (unlike wind, solar or nuclear power) it releases greenhouse gases. Others put more stock in its relative benefits over coal and believe it can fit into a strategy to contain emissions, if the government adopts a plan to move the nation toward carbon-free energy sources over the coming decades. Both sides should recognize the value of preventing more unburned gas from escaping into the air. Relatively inexpensive measures could diminish gas leaks and allow more fuel to be used instead of wasted.

The Obama administration has already promulgated regulations that will limit methane emissions from some natural gas wells. But some facilities remain uncovered, including so-called wet gas operations, from which companies retrieve trapped oil as well as gas. If the Environmental Protection Agency can find a way short of new regulations that will significantly slash methane leakage, so much the better. But there's a strong case for common rules applying across the varied drilling operations around the country, rather than a piecemeal approach. No one should be surprised or dismayed if the Obama administration concludes that the only effective way to ensure natural gas isn't uselessly and harmfully released is to demand a little more effort from energy companies.