

The Post's View

# New rules on methane emissions take aim at a major pollutant

By Editorial Board January 17

THE WHITE HOUSE [kicked off a new effort](#) to cut back on greenhouse gases Wednesday, [announcing new rules on methane](#), a potent warming agent that shows up in coal mines, drilling sites and landfills. The oil and natural gas industry reacted fiercely to proposed requirements on drillers. Environmentalists charged that the Obama administration hadn't gone far enough. In fact, the rules aren't perfect — but they are welcome.

Methane is the [primary component](#) of natural gas, [production of which has jumped by 22 percent in the last five years](#) because of unconventional drilling techniques popularly known as “fracking.” When burned in a power plant, natural gas produces about half the carbon dioxide as coal, the fuel for which it substitutes. But when [methane escapes into the air unburned](#), it is a powerful greenhouse gas. The net effects of America's natural gas boom will depend heavily on how well drillers, processors and distributors prevent leaks.

That's why the Environmental Protection Agency and the Interior Department are getting involved. Interior is set to require that drillers on federal lands limit methane venting and flaring. The EPA is preparing to place basic requirements on all new drilling facilities, whether on public or private land. The White House says the regulations will [reduce oil and gas sector methane emissions by 40 percent to 45 percent by 2025](#), whereas

emissions may have increased by 25 percent without action.

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The industry argues that drillers would have cut emissions, anyway, because they can sell gas they prevent from leaking. Instead of new rules, why not just rely on companies to do the right thing? Preventing leakage is fairly inexpensive, but might in some cases result in a net cost for drillers; thus market forces alone won't fix the problem. In fact, though, much of the plan is voluntary. Existing operations outside federal land won't be subject to the EPA's new mandates. The government is demanding only that any new or substantially changed operations meet higher standards before being put into service.

The announced rules also leave out the vast distribution networks that pipe natural gas into homes and businesses for heating and cooking. Aging pipes in big cities — including Washington — have been found to be extremely leaky. But operators often don't have much incentive beyond safety considerations to improve their systems, because they can charge customers for leaked gas.

Natural gas has the potential to power the economy more cleanly than coal for a time, easing a transition away from greenhouse gas-intensive fuels. But that potential won't be realized without strong steps to curb methane emissions. The Obama administration is right not to rely entirely on voluntary industry effort on the part of companies — and it should not rule out expanding its regulatory reach beyond drilling sites.

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