

CORTEZ JOURNAL

Methane Capture

July 29, 2016

We are used to making top 10 lists, usually for an amenity – best biking, hiking, outdoor town – which is why it was disconcerting a few years ago to learn that we made a list of another kind.

In October 2014, scientists published in *Geophysical Research Letters* a paper entitled, “Four Corners: The largest US methane anomaly viewed from space.” The Four Corners region ranked No. 1 for the nation’s largest concentration of methane gas.

It was heartening then to learn last week that La Plata Electric Association (LPEA) is considering a methane capture project in southwestern La Plata County in partnership with Williford Resources, and that co-ops and some in the industry are embracing these win-win projects that lets them capture and sell the gas and keep it out of the atmosphere.

Methane is an odorless, colorless greenhouse gas that, over a 20-year period, is more than 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide at trapping the sun’s heat, dwarfing the impact of carbon dioxide emissions, and making the American Southwest increasingly vulnerable to climate change. Methane releases volatile organic compounds that create ozone which contributes to poor air quality, harming people with asthma or respiratory conditions. Ozone levels in the Four Corners barely meet the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) national air quality standards, a problem more often seen in large urban areas.

The EPA has called the San Juan Basin of Colorado and New Mexico the most productive coalbed methane basin in North America. For decades, oil and gas companies have exploited this resource, drilling approximately 60,000 wells across the region. Energy development has greatly benefited our communities and economies but continues to leave a legacy of environmental impacts and we are left to address the negative byproducts of industry. With exposed coal seams and open mine shafts, not all methane seepage is the result of leaking equipment and human activity, but the study suggests that is the likely source.

Because human activity is the only piece of the puzzle we can address, the EPA recently issued new rules to limit methane pollution at new oil and gas sites, as did the Bureau of Land Management requiring industry to limit methane escaping into the air on public and native American lands.

The American Petroleum Institute said industry is already fixing leaks and called the new rules “unreasonable.” But through innovation and use of infrared cameras, companies like Jonah Energy based in Denver have cut repair time and labor costs at their operations in Wyoming and think the new regulations can simultaneously be effective and make economic sense.

We applaud the BLM and EPA for taking action, and LPEA for taking a step forward on a project that makes good economic and environmental sense. Though a step in the right direction, we do need a comprehensive approach to resolve some of our toughest air, land and water quality issues so, as with the Gold King mine spill, the public is not left footing the bill.