

Guest Column: Two Western states act to control methane

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New Mexico, the third-ranking U.S. oil producer, has moved to curtail methane pollution from the oil and gas industry, moving it closer to neighboring Colorado's leadership. Methane is a dangerous greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change and also damages human health.

With the United States among the world's top methane polluters, and the Biden administration promising tighter nationwide rules, these two Western states set a bar for other states to follow.

For decades, the oil and gas industry has freely discharged the colorless pollutant from tens of thousands of wells as a cost-savings measure. Then this March, New Mexico banned the wasteful venting and flaring of natural gas, which is comprised almost entirely of methane. New Mexico is only the third state, after Colorado and Alaska, to ban the practice.

This May, New Mexico also proposed a final rule to staunch leaking of methane from across the state's oil and gas supply chain, which includes part of the mammoth Permian Basin it shares with Texas. The leaking

occurs at well pads, pipelines, compressors, storage facilities and more.

It's a system-wide problem that generates methane plumes large enough to detect from space.

The proposed rule on leaking, now up for public comment, improves on a December draft that offered broad loopholes. When it's made final, it will require regular inspection and repair of leaky equipment, which today goes largely unmitigated as yet another industry cost-savings measure.

The state effort means New Mexico is catching up with Colorado. In 2014, Colorado became the first state to regulate methane and has twice strengthened its original rule. Colorado has also modernized its oil and gas regulatory agency's mission so that it includes safeguarding public health. And it is reworking oil and gas bonding requirements so taxpayers don't get burdened with plugging leaky "orphan wells" abandoned by producers.

Colorado's rules were a model for the first national methane regulations, implemented under President Obama in 2016. Unfortunately, the Trump administration dismantled those rules.

Controlling methane is a climate imperative. Because the gas has 80 times the heat-trapping potential of carbon dioxide, it's a potent driver of climate change. NASA says it has fueled a whopping 25 percent of the human-caused global warming that today increasingly jeopardizes Western water, agriculture and recreation.

Research also shows that methane is entering the atmosphere from sources such as wetlands or thawing permafrost. In the latter, warming tied to methane begets more methane. It is the ominous type of feedback loop that global warming alarmists have warned us about for decades.

But the good news is that methane only survives in the atmosphere for about 10 years, unlike the centuries-long lifespan of carbon dioxide. Consequently, methane rules today could produce swift returns on climate as the world grapples with the harder problem of carbon dioxide.

But methane and associated pollutants also contribute to harmful ground-level ozone, which is linked to premature birth, respiratory sickness and other illnesses. New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham made this part of her campaign for regulation, pointing out that poor air quality disproportionately harms poor communities.

That concern helped build support from indigenous and other groups, outweighing fears that new regulations would detract from drilling royalties, which provide over a third of New Mexico's revenue for education, health and other services.

Part of the New Mexico governor's strategy in winning support for methane control was focusing on fiscal accountability. Venting, flaring, and leaking - all monumentally wasteful practices - send an estimated \$43 million in potential state revenue into New Mexico's thin air every year.

At the national level, President Biden campaigned on restoring federal methane regulations rolled back under Trump. Biden issued executive orders on his first day in office that set a September goal for proposing a new strategy. Crafting new federal rules are expected to take years, but New Mexico and Colorado now offer

strong examples. By applying rules to both new and existing oil and gas infrastructure, they exceed the original Obama regulations, which only addressed new permits.

Today, Western states, along with heavy oil producers Texas and North Dakota, offer only a patchwork of tax incentives and voluntary targets. Limited rules, however, often tilt in industry's favor. Now, with fossil fuel production ramping back up and global temperatures rising, New Mexico and Colorado show that tougher regulations are the way to go.

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