

Obama's Methane Regulation Plan Too Weak to Fix Climate Crisis, Say Green Groups



Lake Side Power Station in Vineyard, Utah. (Photo: Mscalore/Wikimedia/cc)

by Sarah Lazare, staff writer

‘While the Obama Administration puts off taking action, the world is already feeling the devastating impacts of climate disruption.’ — Kate DeAngelis, Friends of the Earth

The Obama administration's new plan to regulate methane, formally unveiled on Wednesday, does not go far enough—or take effect quickly enough—to make real progress in the effort to curb the climate crisis, say green groups.

A cornerstone of the Obama administration's strategy is a “new goal to cut methane emissions from the oil and gas sector by 40 – 45 percent from 2012 levels by 2025,” according to a White House fact sheet.

Methane emissions are up to 87 times more climate polluting than carbon dioxide over a 20-year span, and according to the Obama administration's own research, “accounted for nearly 10 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in 2012, of which nearly 30 percent came from the production transmission and distribution of oil and natural gas.”

The “series of steps” outlined to meet this goal, however, falls short of what environmental organizations have called for.

The administration will embark on a plan to impose new methane pollution standards on “new and modified oil and gas production sources, and natural gas processing and transmission sources,” according to a White House fact sheet.

Existing sources of methane pollution will not face any new requirements.

According to critics, exclusion of old and existing wells from the new plan is a glaring omission. A recent study by Princeton University researchers, for example, found that the 300,000 to 500,000 abandoned oil and gas wells in Pennsylvania are responsible for “substantial” methane emissions. “Millions of abandoned wells exist across the country and some are likely to be high emitters,” the scientists warn.

Furthermore, there will be a significant delay in the implementation of these not-yet-defined standards. “EPA will issue a proposed rule in the summer of 2015 and a final rule will follow in 2016,” states the White House fact sheet.

“Putting out a plan that aims to reduce methane emissions is yet another delay in making true progress,” said Kate DeAngelis, climate and energy campaigner of Friends of the Earth, in a statement released Wednesday. “While the Obama Administration puts off taking action, the world is already feeling the devastating impacts of climate disruption. If the Obama administration is serious about addressing climate change, we must leave fossil fuels in the ground.”

Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune added in a statement released Wednesday that controlling methane “is not an end in itself and it will not make fracked oil and gas climate friendly.”

The Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday released a “strategy” for developing the methane regulations. However, David Arkush, Managing Director of Public Citizen’s Climate Program, said, “It’s disappointing that the EPA issued a plan to regulate rather than proposing an actual rule.”

“Simply put, the Obama administration’s methane regulations are equivalent to putting lipstick on a pig—they address the problem, but they don’t exactly fix it,” wrote Wenonah Hauter, executive director for Food & Water Watch, in an op-ed published Wednesday.

“The only responsible path forward is to keep coal, oil and natural gas underground,” Hauter continued. “The time has come to aggressively overhaul our nation’s energy system, incentivizing renewable energy and energy efficiency. Rather than supporting conventional fuels through tax breaks and subsidies, we need our leaders to have the courage to forge a real path toward energy security and independence.”

Bill Snape, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity, told Common Dreams in a phone interview that the administration “continues to be good with building architecture and proposing systems to deal with greenhouse gas solutions, but when it comes to actually implementing and finalizing rules, they fall down, and we are seeing that here.” “I don’t want to diss the whole proposal,

because it is a workable framework,” Snape added. “But on every single detail, the administration gives the industry just what they want or remains vague about it so that they can be flexible down the road.”

Obama has been blasted for his “all of the above” strategy on combating climate change, which holds that ongoing fossil fuel extraction and processing, including of so-called clean coal and natural gas, can be part of the solution to global warming.

Numerous studies have found that to stem the climate crisis, a majority of the world’s fossil fuels must stay in the ground. A peer-reviewed study published last month in the journal *Nature* found that, in order to avoid a catastrophic global temperature increase, the majority of fossil fuel deposits around the world—including 92 percent of U.S. coal, all Arctic oil and gas, and a majority of Canadian tar sands—must remain untapped.