

BREAKING: EPA Finalizes Methane Rule For New Oil And Gas Operations

by Samantha Page
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The Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday issued its final rule for methane emissions from the oil and gas industry.

The rule limits methane emissions from new oil and gas infrastructure and requires operators to submit to semi-annual or quarterly monitoring, depending on the type of operation. In addition, the agency took another step toward drafting a rule that would apply to existing oil and gas operations.

“They will help keep the nation on track to help the us cut emissions from the oil and gas sector,” EPA administrator Gina McCarthy said on a call with reporters Thursday. The new rule will reduce emissions by 11 million tons per year of CO₂ equivalent by 2025, she said.

The Obama administration has a goal of reducing methane emissions from the oil and gas sector



CREDIT: AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast - In this June 12, 2014 file photo, oil pumps and natural gas burn off in Watford City, N.

by 40 to 45 percent from 2012 levels by 2025. Natural gas is 80 percent methane, while oil extraction processes also often release methane trapped underground. In 2012, 30 percent of the country’s methane emissions came from oil and gas operations.

Methane is a potent greenhouse gas, trapping heat 86 times more effectively than CO₂ over a 20-year span, so leaking methane can be a huge problem. While natural gas burns more cleanly than coal, leaks in the system can eliminate the climate benefits. Scientists have found that in the United States, methane leaks and venting have nullified any emissions benefit from transitioning the electricity sector from coal- to natural gas-fired power plants. In fact, the EPA recently found that the problem of escaping methane

is even worse than initially feared. The United States currently gets a third of its electricity from natural gas, up from 24 percent in 2010.

“Natural gas is not a ‘bridge fuel’ to a clean energy economy, but a greenhouse gang-plank,” Charlie Cray, a Greenpeace researcher, said in a statement. “What we need to make a real contribution to reducing climate change is a complete halt on any new gas-related investments, as well as a stop to oil and gas leases on public lands.”

The final rule increases monitoring frequency — and smaller wells will be included

There are, though, two key changes from the initial draft rule the EPA published last year that environmentalists welcomed. Under the new rule, natural gas compressors will be subject to quarterly monitoring — twice as often as under the proposal. In addition, low-production wells will be included in the rule. In its fact sheet, the agency credited the changes to the more than 9,000 public comments it received after the draft rule was published.

“The Obama administration improved the methane rule after facing intense pressure over the weak initial proposal, but there are still some missed opportunities for reducing the oil and gas industry’s massive pollution problem,” said the Center for Biological Diversity’s Anna Moritz. “We desperately need strong methane rules for both new and existing oil infrastructure, but the best way to protect our climate is to keep dirty fossil fuels in the ground.”

The final rule will go into effect 60 days after its publication in the Federal Register.

Responding to a question about the upcoming election and the rule’s life under a new administration, McCarthy said the new rule, which falls under the Clean Air Act, a law requiring the EPA to regulate harmful air toxins, is safely within the legal mandate of the agency.

“The industry has tremendous success in using the law and the science,” McCarthy said.

In addition, she said, the new rule would not raise oil costs and have little to no impact on natural gas prices. “We continue to see this as enormously cost-effective,” she said.

The agency has faced criticism — and a lawsuit — for not adequately accounting for cost in a rule that limits mercury emissions from power plants. It has also been sued over the Clean Power Plan, the Waters of the United States rule, and other environmental steps taken under this administration. It’s expected that either industry or states will sue over the new methane regulations, as well.

Environmentalists, on the other hand, welcomed the rule as a positive first step, but called for additional action. At present, existing infrastructure is not required to limit methane emissions under the Clean Air Act.

“We will remain steadfast in our efforts urging EPA to move expeditiously on its commitment to address existing sources of this highly potent greenhouse gas—which will continue to be responsible for the vast majority of this pollutant—and is essential in meeting the Paris climate agreement,” Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club, said in a statement.