

Proposed methane rule repeal continues Trump's deregulation of polluters

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14 September 2018

The Trump administration Tuesday proposed to roll back environmental safeguards on the oil and gas industry. The action by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) would relax requirements to monitor for leaks of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, from new oil and gas drilling operations. The agency admits the changes would lead to higher emissions not only of the warming gas but also other co-pollutants that directly harm public health.

The proposal is another step by the Trump administration to weaken or rescind climate change regulations issued by the Obama administration. It is the third climate-related move by acting EPA chief Andrew Wheeler in a little over two months since taking over for the scandal-plagued Scott Pruitt. In July, Wheeler proposed freezing fuel economy and greenhouse gas standards for automobiles. Last month, the EPA released a plan to allow coal power plants to emit more carbon dioxide emissions.

The new proposal would delay mandatory leak self-inspections to once a year from every six months, and allow double the amount of time to repair those leaks—60 days rather than 30. It would also exempt equipment in certain applications from leak monitoring and permit compliance with state rules in lieu of federal ones, even if the state standards are less stringent.

With Tuesday's announcement, the Trump administration is continuing to reverse the environmental strategy pursued under the Obama administration, which sought to promote illusions of incremental progress in addressing climate change while ensuring that the long-term profit interests of industry were protected. The current administration is not satisfied with such half measures. Instead it openly seeks to remove regulatory barriers to profit, whatever the costs to health and the planet.

Obama's methane rule addressed the third largest source of greenhouse gases in the country—oil and gas extraction. In the face of an extraordinary global climate crisis, it stands out only as one of the most miniscule possible responses. A decade into the rapid expansion of drilling in the US, the federal government refused to put in place any comprehensive set of controls to limit the environmental destruction and human health consequences of drilling.

The 2016 rule required little more than full implementation of common leak-monitoring industry practices. Janet McCabe, who headed up the EPA air pollution office under the Obama administration, highlighted its limited scope in an email to E&E news, published yesterday. "There's nothing ground-breaking about the technologies or activities called for in the 2016 rule," she wrote.

Methane is the main component of natural gas. When it is released into the atmosphere unburned, it is 80 times more potent as a warming agent than carbon dioxide over a 20-year time span. The high potency means that even low rates of leakage can have significant impacts on climate. The Environmental Defense Fund, which has coordinated an effort with scientists and industry to measure methane leakage, estimates that at just a three percent leakage rate, natural gas is as harmful to climate change as coal.

In an assessment published this year in the journal *Science*, researchers estimated that the current leakage rate from the oil and gas system in the United States is 2.3 percent. The estimate called into question EPA's previous assessment, which concluded leakage is 60 percent lower.

The rule change proposed by the Trump administration will ensure that no meaningful action is required to better control these leaky systems.

EPA made clear in its release of the plan that this is just an initial step in a broader deregulation of the oil and gas industry. The agency “continues to consider broad policy issues in the 2016 rule, including the regulation of greenhouse gases in the oil and natural gas sectors. These issues will be addressed in a separate proposal at a later date,” a fact sheet accompanying the proposal stated. Alongside EPA’s proposal, the Bureau of Land Management is expected to make final a rule to remove restrictions on methane flaring and venting on public lands.



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