

EPA's methane crackdown to come slow and easy

By Neela Banerjee - InsideClimate News
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The Obama administration on Jan. 14 announced its long-awaited plan to control the oil and gas industry's emissions of methane, saying it would in the next decade cut in half leaks of the potent global-warming pollutant.

The White House called its approach a crucial step to achieving the greenhouse-gas emissions targets President Barack Obama announced in November in Beijing, but some environmental advocates said the plan, which relies heavily on voluntary efforts, does not go far enough.

The plan calls for the Environmental Protection Agency to propose methane reductions at new oil and gas sites by this summer, and to issue a final rule next year. The goal is to cut the industry's emissions 40 to 45 percent below the 2012 level by the year 2025.

Despite being an important expansion of greenhouse gas regulations under the Clean Air Act, the proposed rule would not address methane leaking from existing oil and gas wells and delivery networks. Rather, the administration said it would work with industry on voluntary efforts to cut methane from existing oil and gas sites, which studies have found to be riddled with leaks.

Existing sites would be covered partially by an EPA measure requiring energy companies to eliminate emissions of volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, in areas that exceed federal limits for smog. Cutting VOCs produces a side benefit of reducing methane leaks, too. The Bureau of Land Management will also issue rules this spring that would reduce methane from new and existing oil and gas wells on federal lands. But most oil and gas development occurs on private lands.

Further, the plan does little to address methane from agriculture, which is the biggest source of the gas in the U.S. Livestock and their manure account for about 34 percent of domestic methane emissions, compared with 29 percent from the oil and gas sector. The only measure included in the White House methane strategy for agriculture is a set of voluntary steps issued in August 2014 to convert manure to fuel through biodigesters.

"We are starting with new sources because that's where investment is, that's where emissions are coming from," said Dan Utech, special assistant to the president for energy and climate change. Utech, who said the administration agreed that emissions from existing fuel sites needed to be controlled as well, called the strategy part of a longer effort that would fulfill Obama's Beijing pledge to cut overall greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide and other pollutants, by 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels in the coming decade.

"We're not going to get there overnight," he said. "This is a set of steps that puts us on a trajectory to hit that goal."

Only 9 percent of domestic greenhouse gas emissions are methane. But it is more than 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide, and its emissions are expected to rise without government efforts to curtail it.

"While setting methane standards for the first time is an important step, failing to immediately regulate existing oil and gas equipment nationwide misses 90 percent of the methane pollution from the industry," said Conrad Schneider, advocacy director for the Clean Air Task Force, a Boston-based environmental group. "The administration is proposing to fight methane pollution with one hand tied behind its back, not using the full range of powers under the Clean Air Act to cut these emissions."

The new methane strategy is the latest example of the Obama administration's cautious approach to regulating the oil and gas industry.

EPA headquarters, for example, shut down three investigations in Pennsylvania, Wyoming and Texas into possible well-water contamination after its regional investigators identified possible links to nearby oil and gas development. A major EPA study of the possible effects on water from oil and gas development has become more circumscribed under industry pressure.

The increase in natural gas production and with it, low prices, have allowed the Obama administration to clamp down on coal-fired power generation, the regulatory cornerstone of its fight against climate change.

But methane leaks from natural gas fields have undermined the supposed advantage of natural gas in addressing climate change.

Under the Clean Air Act, if the EPA moves to regulate new sources of methane pollution, it must eventually address existing sources. But the act did not establish a deadline for action on existing sources, and the White House did not announce when it would issue rules for existing methane sources. Yet when the administration spelled out plans in 2013 to address the power sector, Obama himself set a schedule for rules for new plants and existing facilities.

Without a clear deadline to address existing sites, regulating methane could fall to the next presidential administration, which might lack Obama's commitment to tackling climate change.

The administration's light hand did not placate the drilling industry, which said the rules could imperil economic growth. "As oil and natural gas production has risen dramatically, methane emissions have fallen thanks to industry leadership and investment in new technologies," said Jack Gerard, chief executive of the American Petroleum Institute. "Another layer of burdensome requirements could actually slow down industry progress to reduce methane emissions."

Emissions from natural gas production have dropped because of a 2012 EPA rule to cut VOCs from gas sites, and the new strategy would extend the VOC reductions to new oil wells, too.

The administration faces a Republican-led Congress intent on blocking Obama's climate-change agenda, which relies heavily on new regulations and other executive actions. To stymie the White House plan on methane, Congress would have to pass a law banning the EPA from regulating the pollutant, or try to strip away funding for the plan's implementation. Congress risks vetoes from Obama with any such actions, said Daniel J. Weiss, senior vice president for campaigns at the League of Conservation Voters.

The next Groundhog Day may help predict air quality in the future

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On Groundhog Day, Feb. 2, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is to hold a hearing in Sacramento on their recently released smog standard. The new proposal would strengthen the current standard from 75 parts per billion (ppb) to a range of 65-70 ppb.

Officials of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District say it would be impossible using known technologies for the Valley to comply with the new standard without eliminating use of virtually all gasoline- or diesel-powered vehicles.

The hearing is open to the public and will be used as a platform for clean air advocates to express their support for a 60 ppb standard, as recommended by EPA scientists. They say that would significantly reduce asthma, cardiovascular disease, and death.

The hearing is set for 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. at the California Air Resources Board, 1001 "I" Street in Sacramento.