

Statesman

Opinion

Opinion: Another Trump rollback that will harm Texans

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The Trump administration recently decided to give the oil and gas industry a huge windfall that will be bad news for millions of Texans.

The Trump Environmental Protection Agency proposed to throw out regulations that the Obama Administration had put into place to protect neighbors of oil and gas production, processing, transmission and storage operations from harmful emissions of toxic air pollutants and to protect the planet from a powerful greenhouse gas.

The Obama regulations prevent intentional venting of natural gas, which consists mostly of methane, into the atmosphere during the production process and impose modest requirements on new processing, transmission and storage facilities. Such deliberate venting has been common in the industry, but the Obama rules prohibit that practice. They also require facilities to use special devices to detect leaks of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and then fix such leaks within a reasonable time.

The reason that methane emissions need to be regulated is that the methane that escapes while natural gas is produced, processed, transmitted and stored is one of the most potent contributors to global warming. It is at least 28 to 38 times as potent as carbon dioxide at trapping heat, and it hangs around in the atmosphere for around 12 years.

Methane emissions from oil and gas production sources and natural gas processing and transmission sources account for 3.4 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. EPA estimated that the regulations would result in the reduction of 300,000 tons of methane, 150,000 tons of VOCs, and 1,900 tons of hazardous air pollutants that can cause a variety of diseases, including cancer.

By all accounts, companies have been complying with the regulations as they sink new wells and build new processing, transmission and storage facilities. In fact, some large companies are going beyond the requirements of the Obama rules to conserve valuable methane.

In a determined effort to roll back virtually every protective regulation issued by the Obama administration, EPA published its proposal to rescind the regulations insofar as they applied to methane and to completely deregulate the transmission and storage segments of the industry.

Then came surprise. Three of the largest oil and gas companies – Shell, BP, and Exxon – came out in opposition to the Trump rollback. They properly saw it as a windfall to their less conscientious competitors, and they realized that it was inconsistent with the natural gas industry’s “good guy” image as a less polluting fossil fuel than coal.

The Trump administration also had a hidden agenda. By dropping the Obama administration’s regulation of methane emissions from new sources, EPA escapes its statutory obligation to promulgate guidelines requiring states to regulate methane emissions from the thousands of existing wells, hundreds of existing processing facilities, and thousands of miles of existing pipelines.

The Trump move will have a direct impact on Texans living near new fracking platforms, gas processing plants, pipelines and storage facilities while at the same time rewarding the “bad actors” who do not want to subject their new projects to protective regulations.

But it will also mean that Texans who are already suffering from emissions from existing oil and gas facilities will get no relief from the federal government any time soon.

As EPA entertains public comments on its deregulatory proposal, it should listen to the big companies that want to bolster natural gas’s image, the public health professionals who want to protect people living near gas facilities, and the scientists who warn us that failure to limit greenhouse gas emissions will lead to catastrophic climate disruption.

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