Conserving energy extracted from public lands should be a no-brainer

By Steve Bonowski

Waste is not conservative. That is why conservative presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan made fighting waste a priority. Both presidents believed that conservation was essential to keeping America strong.

That's why any true conservative should support efforts to prevent the kind of waste that costs taxpayers a bundle. The Bureau of Land Management recently took a great step in that direction with its Methane and Waste Prevention Rule, which requires oil and gas companies to be responsible and capture the natural gas they extract from our public lands. Unfortunately, though, on Feb. 3 the House of Representatives voted to repeal the rule with most Republicans in agreement. Eleven Republicans voted against the repeal, three Democrats voted for it. Now the issue has moved to the Senate.

The BLM, which oversees oil and gas development on nearly 250 million acres of public lands, went through a lengthy rulemaking process before it issued its methane-capture rule, reviewing thousands of public comments and holding listening sessions across the country. Last November, the agency published the result of all that work: a new set of guidelines, known as the Methane and Waste Prevention Rule, to make sure that when oil and gas are produced on our public lands, companies are using best practices to minimize the waste of natural gas.

President Theodore Roosevelt surely would have approved. As he told Congress in 1907, "To waste, to destroy, our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them."

Unfortunately, special interests and lobbyists are calling the shots on this issue, and too many supposedly "conservative" members of Congress want the new guidelines repealed.

The American Petroleum Institute, the oil and gas industry's chief lobbying arm, has doubled down on efforts to eliminate the BLM's wasted-gas rule, declaring shortly after the election that overturning it was a top priority. API has spent more than $13 million on lobbying over the last two years and, according to the New York Times, the energy industry spends about $300 million a year lobbying Congress, deploying an army of lobbyists—three for each member.

They are using money to paper over the fact that the methane waste rule would save an estimated $300 million worth of natural gas that, until now, has been wasted from public lands every year. That's right: Even as the industry spends $300 million a year lobbying our elected officials, it is wasting $300 million of our shared natural resources.

Anyone who shares an American ethic of stewardship can recognize that the BLM's rule makes sense. All told, taxpayers could gain as much as $800 million in royalties over 10 years—but only if the rule is left intact by the conservatives in the Senate, who should not even be considering overturning it.

In seeking to gut the rule, Republicans are using the Congressional Review Act as their scalpel. As the Washington Post has noted, using the act is "wholly legitimate" but the devil lies in the details. Once the Congressional Review Act is used to negate the BLM's regulations, the agency would be prohibited from ever creating a similar rule again. In the BLM's case, how would the agency ever be able update its antiquated rules on the matter?

In the West, where most public-lands drilling occurs, the idea of preventing waste is popular. A recent survey found that 81 percent of Western voters, including a whopping 84 percent of
A recent survey found that 81 percent of Western voters, including a whopping 84 percent of Republicans, want to keep the wasted-gas rule in place.

Minimizing waste from our natural resources is one of the few issues that people across ideologies can agree on. But whom will our Republican friends in the Senate listen to when it comes to a vote? Will they listen to the high-paid industry lobbyists, or will they listen to their constituents and continue the conservative tradition of fighting waste?

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