EPA seeks to relax rules on methane emissions, admits harmful health impacts

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The Philadelphia Energy Solutions oil refinery owned by The Carlyle Group is seen at sunset in front of the Philadelphia skyline March 24, 2014. (David Parrott / Reuters file)

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Under a new proposal that the Environmental Protection Agency released on Tuesday, oil and gas companies would be permitted to conduct less frequent inspections for methane leaks at their facilities and would be given more time to make repairs.

The agency estimated that its proposal, which was first reported by The New York Times, would save up to $484 million in regulatory costs between 2019 and 2025, at the expense of at least $54 million in domestic societal costs due to methane's impact on climate, including higher flood risk and air-conditioning costs.

The EPA called the Obama-era climate rules "overly burdensome and duplicative."

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By Suzy Khimm

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But in its own analysis, the EPA said it expected the proposed changes “may also degrade air quality and adversely affect health and welfare effects associated with exposure” to some, particularly mutter and other pollutants that would rise in addition to methane gas.

The agency said that it did not quantify the harm or include them in its cost analysis because of a lack of relevant data. However, the EPA’s analysis said that instances of premature death, stroke, chronic bronchitis and low birth weight could rise due to higher emissions of harmful pollutants. The agency also recently estimated that its proposed changes to Obama-era rules for coal plants would cause up to 1,400 more deaths per year.

“The EPA is acknowledging that rolling back these pollution protections will have an impact on our children’s health, on the health of our communities, and they’re going ahead with it anyway,” said Matthews Girvan, associate legislative director of the Sierra Club. “They’re responding to the request of the dirty fuel industry.”

The EPA did not respond to a request for comment.

Environmentalists also decried the administration’s decision to undermine the battle against climate change, pointing out that methane traps significantly more heat than carbon dioxide, and said the agency was hiding the true cost of global warming by only considering the impact of higher emissions on the U.S., instead of globally.

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Methane is a very dangerous climate pollutant — its effects are severe,” said Howard Crystal, senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, criticizing the EPA for rolling back “nearly achievable corrections.”

“Methane gas is a super-pollutant for climate change and today’s EPA action is wasteful and outrageous,” Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., said in a statement. “This shortsighted proposal is yet another example of the Trump EPA ignoring its responsibility to protect American families.”

Oil and gas companies lauded the Trump administration for its proposal, saying they would help the industry while protecting public health.

“We welcome EPA’s efforts to get this right and the proposed changes could ensure that the rule is based on best engineering practices and cost-effective,” Howard Feldman of the American Petroleum Institute said in a statement.

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