We must confront the short and long-term threats of methane emissions. This is how | Opinion

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A Marcellus shale gas-drilling site along PA Route 87, Lycoming County. Nicholas A. Tonelli | Flickr Commons

By Jeffery W. Perkins

As communities across Pennsylvania try to recover from the devastation wrought by COVID-19, state and corporate leaders have a rare opportunity to address another threat to public health, our climate and an entire industry’s future: dangerous levels of methane emissions from the oil and gas sector.

Natural gas is primarily made up of methane, which oil and gas companies then sell. But during the production process, methane and other smog-forming pollutants escape, threatening our air quality, health, and the climate.
As Pennsylvanians face the pandemic, our primary concern is safeguarding peoples’ health, particularly the most vulnerable among us, like seniors and those with underlying chronic and respiratory conditions.

The air pollution caused by methane emissions makes it much more difficult to protect them. Cutting methane leaks would bolster public health by curbing these emissions as well as the smog-forming volatile organic compounds and cancer-causing benzene that accompany them.

Methane emissions are responsible for a full 25 percent of our planet’s current global warming.

Recent analysis from scientists at the Environmental Defense Fund shows that oil and gas companies emit over 1 million tons of methane into the air annually in Pennsylvania—16 times what they report to the state.

The climate impact of these methane emissions is double that of all the cars in the state combined. The good news, however, is that cutting methane emissions is one of the fastest and most cost-effective ways to address climate change.

There’s a strong business case for methane mitigation technologies, because wasted methane is wasted product companies could sell.

Investors such as Friends Fiduciary have engaged companies to make methane a key priority in recent years, and leading companies already recognize that methane mitigation makes good business sense.

Shell and ExxonMobil/XTO—both of which have production or downstream operations in Pennsylvania—have set serious methane emission reduction goals and support methane regulation. But companies that fail to enact best practices threaten the industry’s social license to operate.
Strong state methane regulations are needed to ensure all companies meet a minimum performance standard. As the nation’s second largest natural gas producer, Pennsylvania has a clear responsibility to lead in developing solutions to the problem of methane emissions.

Gov. Tom Wolf showed real leadership last year with his executive order to curb climate emissions, including methane. Pennsylvania’s Department of Environmental Protection is currently advancing a draft methane rule that is open for public comment through July 27, with three virtual hearings taking place from June 23-25.

These state rules are critical as at the federal level the Environmental Protection Agency has ignored the science and rolled back federal methane protections. While Pennsylvania’s proposed methane rule is the right course of action, the draft can be improved in two ways.

- First, it should be extended to cover low-producing wells, which account for more than half of Pennsylvania’s oil and gas-related methane emissions.
- Second, it needs to maintain quarterly leak detection and repair (LDAR) inspections, as research has shown that increasing the frequency of inspections can greatly reduce leaks at a reasonable cost.

Comprehensive regulation on methane in Pennsylvania will send a signal to investors, the country, and the world that we can advance long-term climate solutions in a way that both protects our communities and makes good business sense.

Jeffery W. Perkins is the executive director of the Friends Fiduciary Corporation, a Quaker investment management company with offices in Philadelphia.