



By **Lisa Friedman**

Aug. 29, 2019 Updated 10:27 a.m. ET

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WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is set to announce on Thursday that it intends to sharply curtail the regulation of methane emissions, a major contributor to climate change, according to an industry official with knowledge of the plan.

The Environmental Protection Agency, in a proposed rule, will aim to eliminate federal requirements that oil and gas companies install technology to inspect for and fix methane leaks from wells, pipelines and storage facilities.

The proposed rollback is particularly notable because several major energy companies have, in fact, opposed it — just as other industrial giants have opposed previous administration initiatives to dismantle climate-change and environmental rules. Some of the world’s largest auto companies have opposed Mr. Trump’s plans to let vehicles pollute more, and a number of electric utilities have opposed the relaxation of restrictions on toxic mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants.

“This is extraordinarily harmful,” Rachel Kyte, the United Nations special representative on sustainable energy, said of this and other administration efforts to undo climate regulations dating from the Obama administration. “Just at a time when the federal government’s job should be to help localities and states move faster toward cleaner energy and a cleaner economy, just at that moment when speed and scale is what’s at stake, the government is walking off the field.”

Andrew R. Wheeler, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, at a refinery in Trainer, Pa., last month. Matt Rourke/Associated Press

Smaller oil and gas companies have complained to the Trump administration about the Obama rule, saying it is too costly for them to perform the required leak inspections. But major oil and gas companies have called on the Trump administration to tighten

restrictions on methane.

Those larger companies have invested millions of dollars to promote the use of electricity from burning natural gas, which produces about half as much carbon dioxide as coal. They fear that unrestricted leaks of methane could undermine their pitch that gas is a cleaner energy source, leading to lowered demand for the fuel.

Exxon wrote to the Environmental Protection Agency last year urging the agency to maintain core elements of the Obama-era policy. And earlier this year Gretchen Watkins, the United States chairwoman for Shell, said the E.P.A. should impose rules “that will both regulate existing methane emissions but also future methane emissions.”

Susan Dio, the chairwoman and president of BP America, wrote an op-ed article in March saying that regulating methane is the “right thing to do for the planet” and for the natural gas industry. “To maximize the climate benefits of gas — and meet the dual challenge of producing more energy with fewer emissions — we need to address its Achilles’ heel and eliminate methane emissions,” she wrote.

Ben Ratner, a senior director with the Environmental Defense Fund, a group that works closely with oil companies to track and reduce methane emissions, said that as renewable energy becomes more affordable, it could undercut the industry message that natural gas is a cleaner energy source. “The reputation of American natural gas is at the precipice, and methane rollbacks are the shove,” Mr. Ratner said.

Lee Fuller, executive vice president of the Independent Petroleum Association of America, said the smaller operators that his group represents could not absorb the costs that Exxon or Shell could, particularly when it came to inspecting and repairing older wells. “For these small businesses, it’s a very different economic impact.”

The methane regulation has been in the administration’s cross hairs since Mr. Trump’s earliest days in office. In March 2017, Scott Pruitt, then the E.P.A. administrator, tried to suspend the regulation while the agency considered an alternative, but a federal appeals court ruled the move unlawful.

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