

# White House opens door to new rules to cut methane emissions

Administration to study magnitude of leaks from methane before deciding in autumn whether to propose new oil and gas controls

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Pump jacks are seen at dawn in an oil field over the Monterey Shale formation in California. Photograph: David McNew/Getty Images

The White House on Friday opened the way to cutting emissions of methane from the oil and gas industry, saying it would study the magnitude of leaks of the powerful greenhouse gas.

The announcement seemed designed to please the international community – which is meeting in Yokohama to finalise a blockbuster climate report – as well as environmental groups suing to force the Obama administration to regulate the oil and gas industry.

The new strategy announced by the White House on Friday did not immediately direct the Environmental Protection Agency to begin drafting new climate regulations for the oil and gas industry.

Instead, the White House said the EPA would undertake a series of studies to determine the magnitude and prevalence of methane leaks from fracking sites, compressors, and gas pipelines.

The agency would decide by the autumn of 2014 whether to propose new controls on the industry. “In the fall, we will determine the best path forward to get reductions,” a White House

official told a conference call with reporters.

If the EPA does go ahead and propose new rules, the White House official said the agency would aim to complete the process by the time Obama leaves office.

Methane – the primary component of natural gas – is more than 80 times more powerful as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide over a 20-year time frame. Oil and gas sites are the biggest industrial source of methane.

The gas accounted for about 14% of US climate pollution in 2013, according to the EPA's greenhouse gas inventory, and that share is expected to grow.

Environmental groups have been pressing Barack Obama for months to come up with a plan to cut methane.

Without those controls, Obama cannot meet his commitment to cut US greenhouse gas emissions by 17% from 2005 levels.

There are big political risks in taking on America's powerful oil and natural gas interests.

Obama has embraced “natural gas” as part of his all-of-the-above energy strategy, arguing that the shale revolution would help move the US away from more heavily polluting coal. But there is growing evidence methane leaks are far more pervasive than originally thought.

Methane is escaping into the atmosphere from all along the supply chain – from flaring gas wells that light up the night sky in North Dakota to ageing pipes in the north-east.

A study published by the National Academy of Sciences last November found that the Environmental Protection Agency had grossly under-estimated methane releases from gas drilling.

Ninety environmental groups wrote to the EPA last December demanding the agency introduce new regulations on the oil and gas industry.

Methane pollution is projected to increase to a level equivalent to over 620 million tons of carbon dioxide pollution in 2030 without additional action to reduce emissions.

The White House said the EPA would propose new rules for future landfills in the summer of 2014, and was considering new regulations on existing landfills.

The Department of Energy will meanwhile begin exploring the potential of capturing and storing methane in underground waste dumps.