

Dirty Gas Has No Place in a Clean Power Plan

Pennsylvanians Against Fracking Position Statement



Pennsylvanians Against Fracking supports the swift and just transition to 100% renewable energy. We oppose the continued reliance on any and all fossil fuels. Since shale gas development began in Pennsylvania, every administration has aggressively promoted, not just continued but expanded, reliance on natural gas. This has spurred shale gas development and its inevitable damage and is absolutely unacceptable.

The Obama administration has also promoted an increased reliance on natural gas, touting it as a bridge fuel to get the nation through the transition to renewable energy because it is considered to be cleaner than coal and oil. When burned, it generates about half the CO₂ than that of coal or oil. If that was the whole story of natural gas and climate change, there would still be plenty of reasons to oppose continued shale gas development -- contaminated water, polluted air, illnesses, deaths, destruction of natural resources, and many others. However, natural gas' role in climate change cannot be fully understood without looking beyond consumption to see its impacts during production.

When unconventional drilling began in Pennsylvania, little peer-reviewed science had been done on the new technology. The Environmental Protection Agency incorrectly assumed that methane release rates at well pads were negligible. We now know that a 3% leakage rate at well pads alone cancels any climate benefit natural gas provides when burned; leakage rates of more than double that are typical. Even worse, leaks occur at every phase of production, processing, transmission, and distribution. In addition, every well drilled today will join a legacy of hundreds of thousands of old wells that leak methane unless they are maintained every 25 years. The state has not even located the vast majority of the old wells yet, much less maintained them or developed a system to maintain the new glut of legacy wells .

The only solution is to stop fracking and speed the transition to 100% renewable energy, energy efficiency and conservation. Methods for accomplishing that as soon as 2050 have been proposed. All of the methods rely on honest scientific and technical analysis to guide us forward and aggressive measures requiring political will, measures not found in the Clean Power Plan (CPP) put forward by the Obama administration. Some may view the CPP as a small step forward, but small steps are not helpful when you are at the edge of a cliff and it's the leap that will save you. Make no mistake, we are collectively at the precipice.

Unfortunately, its lack of sufficiently aggressive measures is not the only problem with the Clean Power Plan. In fact, the Clean Power Plan may well do far more harm than good. It may ensure that we will be unable to avert warming the planet beyond the 2 degree C climate scientists have been telling us for several years is the point of no return. More recently, climate scientists have noted more extreme climate impacts at a 1 degree C change than they'd anticipated. At COP21 in Paris in December, 2015, representatives of island nations implored world leaders to agree to reduce the target to 1.5 degrees C. Their nations will be under water by the time the planet hits 2 degrees C.

Below are some of the ways in which the Clean Power Plan, as currently proposed, can actually help push us over the precipice.

The Clean Power Plan puts natural gas in the “clean” column

Methane is a short-lived but very powerful greenhouse gas. In the all-important 20 year time scale, it is 86 times more efficient at heating the atmosphere as is carbon dioxide. As mentioned above, the climate benefit natural gas provides during consumption is quickly canceled thanks to leaks that occur at an alarming rate at every step in the product lifecycle of natural gas and continued leaking that occurs “beyond the grave” as old wells leak without proper maintenance. Natural gas has no place in a true Clean Power Plan, yet Obama’s plan allows for it to be among the energy sources states can choose to achieve their targets.

The Clean Power Plan guarantees reliance on natural gas

States like Pennsylvania that have gone all-in on shale gas development will elect to transition from coal-fired power plants to natural gas-fired power plants rather than transition to clean, sustainable, renewable energy alternatives. When climate scientists are telling us to leave 80% of all fossil fuels in the ground, trading one fossil fuel for another makes no sense economically or in terms of tackling climate change. Coal, oil, natural gas, all fossil fuels that emit greenhouse gases, must be left in the ground.

The Clean Power Plan doesn’t limit how much a state can rely on gas to meet its target

States choosing to meet their targets by relying 100% on natural gas would not be out of compliance with the terms of the Clean Power Plan. Even if no state is brazen enough to propose something so extreme, they are certainly under no pressure to take the kind of aggressive steps needed.

The Clean Power Plan institutionalizes and enables pollution

The public is absorbing the costs of harmful health impacts, disease, drinking water contamination, and environmental degradation that accompanies natural gas development. Taxpayers are burdened with paying for government subsidies and the costs of regulatory loopholes that incentivize natural gas. There is no attempt to realize these hidden costs to provide parity with renewable energy sources, which will lead to perpetuating these unacceptable impacts.

The Clean Power Plan means we can kiss a fracking moratorium or ban goodbye

In his paper, *A Bridge to Nowhere, Methane Emissions and the Greenhouse Gas Footprint of Natural Gas*, Dr. Robert Howarth of Cornell University notes that converting from coal to natural gas will require “unprecedented investment in natural gas infrastructure and regulatory oversight,” the kind of investment you don’t make in a temporary bridge fuel. Although Pennsylvania’s Clean Power Plan is still being drafted, a proliferation of natural gas power plants, attempts to incentivize pipeline development, and the Wolf administration’s recent announcement of methane rules bear out Howarth’s warning. If the Clean Power Plan is not changed to remove natural gas as an alternative to coal, we will continue to see more power plants, more pipelines, more compressor stations, and more wells. The things we will never see are a moratorium or ban on fracking.