

3254

Testimony of Elaine Labalme for PA DEP virtual public hearings on Control of VOC Emissions from Oil and Natural Gas Sources, June 23, 2020

Good evening. My name is Elaine Labalme and I am a consultant to Environmental Defense Fund, a national, nonpartisan environmental nonprofit organization guided by science and economics to find practical and lasting solutions to the most serious environmental problems.. EDF has more than 142,000 members and activists here in Pennsylvania.

I live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with my husband and our 18-year-old son, both of whom are asthmatics. It is this lung ailment, its alarming rate among Pennsylvanians, and how it is exacerbated by air pollution that compelled me to work in the environmental space and help advocate for smart policy prescriptions.

I applaud the leadership of Gov. Tom Wolf and the hard work of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) in advancing a rulemaking to cut emissions of methane and Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) from the existing oil and gas infrastructure in Pennsylvania. However, EDF believes that the proposed existing source oil and gas methane rule must be strengthened in order to protect our health and safeguard our climate.

According to a recent Environmental Defense Fund analysis, oil and gas operations emit more than 1.1 million tons of methane per year, or more than 16 times what the oil and gas industry reports to DEP. Those emissions have an annual climate impact double that from all the cars in Pennsylvania combined.

As we know, methane is a potent greenhouse gas responsible for 25 percent of the climate change we are experiencing today. Climate change can lead to strange and severe weather such as flooding, increases in vector-borne diseases, and hotter, longer summers that worsen ground-level ozone or smog.

Oil and gas operations also directly release more than 63,400 tons of VOCs annually. VOCs combine with nitrogen oxides to form smog in the hot summer months. Smog can exacerbate respiratory diseases such as asthma and emphysema and cause heart disease. This air pollution is especially concerning given that the Centers for Disease Control found people with those underlying medical conditions may be “at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.”

A million-ton methane problem in the second largest natural gas producing state in the nation – and third largest greenhouse gas emitter in the country – calls for serious and swift action.

Moreover, the Environmental Protection Agency under President Trump is expected to finalize rules next month that would gut the agency’s ability to regulate methane and weaken leak detection and repair standards. Clearly, Pennsylvania must lead in the face of federal rollbacks and adopt strong, comprehensive methane standards.

In addition to climate and health benefits, cutting methane waste and pollution is good for our economy. We have the technology to cut methane emissions worldwide by one-third at no net cost. And by adopting strong rules, Pennsylvania can grow its burgeoning methane mitigation industry which already boasts dozens of locations statewide including leak detection and repair services, manufacturing sites, company headquarters, and sales offices. By capturing methane – the primary

component of natural gas – oil and gas companies can generate additional revenue by bringing more product to market.

In the interest of a strong final existing source rule to cut emissions of both methane and VOCs, I urge DEP to take two additional steps. First, close the loophole for low-producing wells that are responsible for more than half the methane pollution from oil and gas sources in Pennsylvania. Second, eliminate the provision that allows operators to reduce the frequency of inspections simply because a previous inspection didn't reveal significant leaks. Large, uncontrolled leaks can happen at any time and regular leak detection and repair is our best defense against them.

In closing, I applaud the governor and the men and women of DEP for their diligent effort in advancing this methane rulemaking. We must continue to tackle the climate crisis as we protect the health, safety and well-being of Pennsylvanians and their communities by strengthening the existing source oil and gas methane rule.

