



Guest Columns

EPA is shirking its duty during current crisis

By Jordan Smith

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We're in a public health and economic crisis. We all know the impacts of this crisis will be felt for years. While we are all busy protecting our families and communities from COVID-19, the Trump Administration is taking advantage of this time to push through its agenda of weakening environmental regulations critical to safeguarding our public health.

Once again, the Trump Administration isn't considering people's health, just industry profits.

In the past three years, Trump's overhauled Environmental Protection Agency has been repealing industry requirements to reduce methane and air pollution from oil and gas wells. And now, the EPA – whose mission is to protect the American people's access to clean air and water – announced it may not penalize industry for violations or require monitoring for the indefinite future, claiming the COVID-19 pandemic will prevent the industry from complying with environmental laws. These are the very laws that protect our public health.

When we are already showing such deficits in that regard, is now the time to loosen public health protections? The last thing our strapped medical institutions and personnel need is increased pollution directly impacting respiratory health, as oil and gas emissions do.

The oil and gas industry is the single largest source of methane emissions, a potent greenhouse gas released along with harmful chemicals during oil and gas operations. More troubling, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration discovered methane has reached a new record high, with this year being the third-largest increase going back 20 years.

And just last week, the Environmental Defense Fund with its scientific partners released new data from the Permian Basin of West Texas and southeast New Mexico revealing methane emissions from the oil and gas industry in the basin are triple the national average reported by the EPA. These findings make the EPA's blanket refusal to enforce basic environmental laws aimed at reducing such emissions and pollution during this pandemic even more egregious. COVID-19 has highlighted an inextricable link: a healthy economy relies on a healthy population.

We at Climate Advocates Voces Unidas (CAVU) understand the oil and gas industry is vital to New Mexico's economy and that it too is suffering during this crisis.

However, this doesn't constitute a license to pollute.

In order for oil and gas companies to operate, they should abide by their responsibility to protect health, safety and the environment. By allowing the industry to pollute to compensate for their losses, they put everyone else at risk, including the industry's own long-term economic outlook. The current COVID-19 crisis underscores the critical need for the EPA to do its job, protecting the economy and public health by serving the people.

At CAVU, we have been working diligently for the past three years as part of a broad coalition of New Mexicans to put commonsense methane rules in place for the oil and gas industry. Gov. Lujan Grisham's pledge to enact nationally leading methane rules in New Mexico shows her wisdom and leadership in the face of national rollbacks.

And we applaud New Mexico Environment Department Secretary James Kenney for taking a more strategic approach by evaluating companies' requests to suspend monitoring or environmental reporting on a case-by-case basis. We encourage state regulators to make it clear that cutting corners on environmental safeguards will not be tolerated in New Mexico!

Visit our website, CAVU.org, and tell the EPA to support environmental protection as an essential service, and demand that the people who fulfill these vital roles be given the tools they need to work safely.

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