

MY VIEW BARBARA WEBBER

New Mexicans need protection from methane gases

By Barbara Webber
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Editor's note: This is another in an occasional series of opinions about the transforming energy economy of New Mexico and its impact on people's health and the environment.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak in New Mexico, media attention has rightly focused on two things: the health statistics of COVID-19 and the economic impact to our state.

Because our economy is intricately tied to the oil and gas industry, the industry's plight is not far behind in terms of sympathetic media coverage. But lost in the coverage is a far more dangerous crisis that has been brewing even before the pandemic: the devastating impacts of the oil and gas industry on New Mexicans' health.

More than 130,000 New Mexicans live within a half-mile of oil and gas development, and for decades we have known those living close to constant pollution suffer from higher rates of cancer, birth defects, asthma and other serious health issues. The double impact of these pollution health issues and the severe impacts from COVID-19 means strong regulations on the oil and gas industry are more important than ever.

This year, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's administration released a set of draft rules to limit harmful methane and ozone pollution from oil and gas production in New Mexico.

The rules are a good first step for methane regulation, but the exemptions they contain mean they might not be effective at lowering emissions and protecting the air we breathe. Exemptions for stripper wells and the 15-ton-per-year pollution threshold for volatile organic compounds, for example, would exempt 95 percent of all the wells in New Mexico — huge loopholes.

As a result, these regulations fail communities that have been hardest hit by the pandemic, and

once again public health impacts are being pushed to the back burner.

Last year, a group of concerned Carlsbad residents began meeting to discuss the impact of oil and gas in their town. The latest methane emissions data from the Permian Basin are the highest ever recorded. New Mexico already had a methane waste problem that costs the state millions of dollars in revenue, but it is getting worse.

Even though our state is a large oil and gas producer, we have had limited regulations on how to handle methane waste. We have needed these rules and regulations, but the industry has fought against them tooth and nail, arguing that they can regulate themselves.

In the meantime, local communities are left to fend for themselves. For example, the organization Citizens Caring for the Future filed 67 complaints to the New Mexico Environment Department between March 2018 and 2020. Most were met with silence, it said. The group's plight is further documented in a video released recently by the nonprofit Climate Advocates Voces Unidas; we do well to listen to New Mexicans' stories and do more to protect their health.

With the recent plunge in oil and gas tax revenue, we know the governor and Legislature face tough challenges. As they work to support our public health system, they should remember that New Mexicans are in desperate need of protection from methane and ozone — during and beyond the pandemic.

We call on the governor and state regulators to disregard the pushback from the oil and gas industry and be vigilant in enforcing strong regulations to protect the health of all New Mexicans — and call on the Legislature to back them up. As the coronavirus pandemic continues, and well after it is over, we must pay closer attention to the needs of citizens living near oil and gas development, especially those in rural communities and tribal lands where health systems already are stretched thin. If we do not, this will only claim more lives and rob the health of our citizens.

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