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TOP STORY

Pennsylvania sets methane requirements on new natural gas wells

By Mike Tony mtony@heraldstandard.com 6 hrs ago



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Pictured is signage along Palmer Adah Road in Luzerne Township for nearby well pads. New thresholds for certain types of pollutants will take effect in the state in August.

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Gov. Tom Wolf and Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Secretary Patrick McDonnell announced earlier this month new permitting requirements in an attempt to control methane from new natural gas sources, two weeks before a new study published Thursday found that methane emissions from U.S. oil and natural gas are significantly higher than the current estimate from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Wolf and McDonnell announced new general permits, GP-5 and GP-5A, that will be required for new or modified compression, processing and transmission stations along pipelines, and new or modified unconventional natural gas wells, respectively.

The permits, slated to take effect on Aug. 8, additionally set thresholds on other types of air pollution, including volatile organic compounds (VOCs), hazardous air pollutants (HAPs), and nitrogen oxides (NOx).

“I think these standards are long overdue,” said Ashley Funk, community organizer at Mountain Watershed Association, a Melcroft-based nonprofit dedicated to protecting the Indian Creek and greater Youghiogheny River watersheds.

Funk noted that the Mountain Watershed Association has worked with families throughout southwestern Pennsylvania who said they have experienced adverse health impacts from unregulated air emissions coming from shale gas wells and compressor stations. Funk recalled that families living near a Laurel Mountain Midstream compressor station in Springhill Township experienced tremors, nausea, dizziness, rashes, and other acute health issues after the compressor station went into operation.

Many of the pollutants that are vented from compressor stations like particulate matter, VOCs and other chemicals, are known to cause symptoms similar to those experienced by people living near the Springhill compressor station, as well as long-term health issues such as cancer, Funk said.

The new state permitting requirements do not establish emission control requirements for existing oil and gas sources.

DEP Press Secretary Neil Shader noted that reducing emissions from existing oil and gas sources is part of the state’s Methane Reduction Strategy, which Wolf first announced in 2016.

“Now that the GP-5/5A permits are final, DEP will continue to collect information from stakeholders and examine how to establish appropriate emission control requirements for existing sources,” Shader said.

DEP held multiple comment periods on the permits, which attracted more than 9,000 comments.

Marcellus Shale Coalition President Dave Spigelmyer said that the natural gas industry is focused on ensuring methane and related emissions are managed safely and effectively, alluding to the fact that natural gas is mostly made of methane.

“(M)ethane is the very product we produce and is used by homeowners and business across the Commonwealth,” Spigelmyer said. “ ... We remain concerned about imposing additional requirements through operating permits, particularly those that exceed DEP’s statutory authority.”

A study published Thursday in the journal Science found that methane emissions are roughly 60 percent higher than the current EPA estimate. The new paper estimates the current methane leak rate from U.S. oil and gas systems is 2.3 percent, above the 1.4 percent estimated for 2015 by the EPA last year. The study’s authors, who include researchers from the Environmental Defense Fund as well as universities including Penn State and Carnegie Mellon, attribute the difference to existing inventory methods missing emissions released during abnormal operating conditions like malfunctions.

Methane is more potent than carbon dioxide as a heat-trapping gas and has 28 to 36 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide (CO₂) over a century, according to the EPA.

Ken Dufalla, president of the Harry Enstrom Chapter of the Izaak Walton League, indicated that methane is a significant factor in concerns he has about air quality in Washington and Greene counties.

“(Shale gas) drilling is a pig in the poke that was sold to the people,” Dufalla said.

Natural gas and petroleum systems are the largest source of methane emissions in the United States, according to the EPA.

Natural gas is replacing coal as the leading source of electric power and is considered a cleaner fuel, emitting approximately half the amount of carbon dioxide as coal, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Impact fee disbursements for drilling activity have been lucrative locally, bolstering area counties and municipalities.

The Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (PUC) announced Thursday nearly \$210 million in natural gas impact fee disbursements for drilling occurring in 2017, including approximately \$7.2 million for Washington County, more than \$4.9 million for Greene County, roughly \$1.2 million for Westmoreland County and a little over \$1 million for Fayette County. Those figures don’t include additional impact fees received by municipalities, including more than \$1.2 million received by Center Township in Greene County, the top receiving municipality statewide for 2017.

Per the PUC, municipalities across Pennsylvania spent about \$25.4 million of their 2016 impact fees on public infrastructure construction alone, while counties allotted approximately \$13.4 million for capital reserve funding and \$5.1 million for emergency preparedness and public safety.

“Pennsylvania’s impact fee ... is working as designed by enabling local governments to direct how the revenues are utilized,” Spigelmyer said.

Funk has observed a different kind of impact and wants the state to expand permitting regulations to more than just new natural gas infrastructure.

“DEP should move toward enforcing these regulations for all shale gas infrastructure in the state,” Funk said.

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