Western Leaders Network

We unite, support, and cultivate local and tribal officials

Re: Methane Rulemakings
Date: Sept. 16, 2020

Dear Secretary Kenney,

As director of Western Leaders Network, I applaud the leadership of Gov. Lujan Grisham and her administration for committing to developing nation-leading rules to reduce methane and air pollution from the oil and gas industry. But if this commendable and necessary goal is to be achieved, the New Mexico Environment Department must make some critical amendments to its draft rule to ensure that these regulations are meaningful and will protect all New Mexicans.

I write to urge NMED to remove exemptions for New Mexico's wells that would allow unabated emissions from low-producing wells and wells below a 15-tons-per-year pollution threshold for health-threatening volatile organic compounds. According to the Environmental Defense Fund, the loopholes that currently exist in the draft rule would allow as many as 95% of New Mexico's wells to pollute unchecked. This would disproportionately affect children as well as indigenous and low-income communities, which are much more likely to live in close proximity to oil and gas activity.

Western Leaders Network is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization of local and tribal elected leaders across the Interior West, including more than 50 in New Mexico who in June wrote to the Governor in support of her pledge to enact nationally leading methane and air pollution rules this year. Our New Mexico leaders intimately understand that the state has a serious problem with air pollution and waste from oil and gas sources.

Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that accounts for 25 percent of global warming we're experiencing today. This unhampered, climate-changing pollution has resulted in worsening air quality, making it that much harder to address the dangerous levels of ozone pollution in counties with oil and gas activity. With hotter temperatures, New Mexico will see more drought and severe wildfire seasons. And methane waste costs New Mexico taxpayers more than $40 million in foregone tax and royalty revenue annually, which is something we can't afford, especially as we deal with the health and economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For all these reasons, NMED must have strong oversight of ozone-forming pollutants from oil and gas operations and ensure major reductions of methane pollution as a co-benefit to those rules from both an air quality and climate change perspective.

As the Trump administration removes critical federal regulations and safeguards to reduce methane waste and pollution, New Mexico has a unique opportunity to lead the nation with comprehensive statewide rules to address climate change and protect its communities' health and environment. I urge NMED to honor this opportunity and correct the defects in its draft rule, so New Mexicans can breathe clean air, collect needed taxpayer revenue, and recover their local economies in the wake of this pandemic.

Sincerely,

Gwen Lachelt

Gwen Lachelt, Executive Director
Western Leaders Network