

Senate defeats repeal of methane rule

By Michael Coleman / Journal Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON – The U.S. Senate voted narrowly Wednesday to defeat an effort to repeal former President Barack Obama’s rule clamping down on the venting and flaring of methane gas by oil and gas companies that drill on federal land in New Mexico and around the country.

The 51-49 Senate vote was hailed as a rare victory for environmentalists under the administration of President Donald Trump, but blasted by business groups that called it a devastating, job-killing blow to the industry.

Three GOP lawmakers – Maine’s Susan Collins, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and John McCain of Arizona – joined forces with Democrats to block efforts to overturn the rule.

Energy companies frequently “flare” or burn off vast supplies of methane, the primary component of natural gas, at drilling sites because it earns less money than oil. Some estimate that \$330 million a year in natural gas is wasted through leaks or intentional releases, enough to power about 5 million homes a year.

The GOP has used the previously obscure Congressional Review Act, which requires just a simple majority in both chambers to overturn rules recently imposed by the executive branch. The latest target was the Interior Department rule on methane, but the effort fell short. The Obama rule applies to venting and flaring on Bureau of Land Management-owned lands.

The New Mexico Business Coalition and other industry groups fought to block the rule under Obama, and then to push Congress to roll it back this year. The oil and gas industry says it’s attacking the problem on its own, with methane emissions at wellheads down 40 percent since 2006.

Imposing new rules would hurt industry, particularly small operators, potentially reducing rather than increasing revenue, said Business Coalition President Carla Sonntag.

But Sen. Tom Udall, a New Mexico Democrat who lobbied McCain and others on the issue, told reporters this week that “repealing this rule would be nothing more than a giveaway to big oil companies and big polluters.”

“Because we were able to fend off this dangerous repeal, New Mexico will continue to benefit from the BLM’s common-sense steps to prevent the waste of taxpayer-owned natural gas, create jobs and shrink the methane hotspot hanging over the Four Corners region,” Udall said.

New Mexico has played a key role in the process that led to the BLM rule because it’s particularly impacted by oil and gas emissions. The San Juan Basin in the Four Corners area is responsible for 14.5 percent of total U.S. methane emissions, according to data from the EPA’s Greenhouse Gas Reporting Program. A 2014 NASA satellite image showed a methane “hot spot” the size of Delaware over the area, although critics of the rule contend much of that is naturally occurring.

New Mexico environmentalists celebrated the Senate vote Wednesday.

“Reducing methane waste is in the interest of all Americans,” said Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, executive director of the Western Environmental Law Center in Taos. “We’re elated that the decade of blood, sweat, and tears that went into bringing BLM into compliance with its legal obligation to minimize public resource waste survived this misguided attack. The Senate made a strong statement today that our public lands are not a commodity to be exploited in service of the oil and gas industry’s whims.”

But a spokesman for the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association said it would burden an industry critical to New Mexico’s economy.

“The Senate has voted to put a devastating, job-killing regulation ahead of American energy jobs, and as it stands, will cost New Mexico over \$100 million in lost revenue and royalties, and countless jobs.”

Rep. Steve Pearce, a New Mexico Republican who voted to roll back the Obama methane rule in the House earlier this year, said the state's economy will suffer under "a harmful Obama-era energy rule that over-regulates responsible energy production across the nation."

Associated Press and Journal staff writer Kevin Robinson-Avila contributed to this report.

Contact the writer.

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