

EPA chief issues 90-day stay on methane regulation

By Rebecca Moss

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With oil and natural gas production bouncing back in southeast New Mexico, environmentalists said Thursday they fear how the state could fare in the face of another Trump administration rollback of environmental regulations for oil and gas companies.

On Tuesday, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt said he would issue a 90-day stay of an EPA methane-capture regulation to give oil and gas companies more time to comment on the rule.

“The EPA is just doing the industry’s bidding,” said Tom Singer of the Western Environmental Law Center.

Carla Sonntag, president of the New Mexico Business Coalition, said she supports Pruitt’s action, calling the methane rule “overreaching and unnecessary regulation that will hurt hard working families throughout our state.”

The Obama administration finalized the methane regulation last year after receiving more than 900,000 comments on the rule, which is designed to protect the climate and public health.

The regulation, which had been set to take effect June 3, requires companies to do additional monitoring of wells and install leak-detection equipment to prevent methane from escaping from their operations.

Methane is the second most potent greenhouse gas. The Four Corners region, one of the state’s highest oil and gas producing areas, has the largest concentration of methane pollution in the nation, estimated to have a mass roughly the size of Delaware, according to NASA studies.

Powerful industry groups, including the American Petroleum Institute and the Texas Oil and Gas Association, said the methane regulation was cumbersome and placed an unnecessary strain on operations, especially small wells.

Pruitt said in a letter to oil and gas groups that the inclusion of low-producing wells in the regulation will be reconsidered and reopened for public comment, “as well as any other matter we believe will benefit from additional comment.”

Oil and gas operators and a number of conservative lawmakers objected to both the EPA rule and a complimentary rule issued by the Bureau of Land Management, which added methane-capture regulations to new and existing wells on federal and tribal land.

Opponents of the regulations include the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn and Gov. Susana Martinez, who wrote a letter supporting a congressional measure to repeal the BLM methane rule. The repeal was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives but has stalled in the Senate.

Robert McEntyre, a spokesman for the state Oil and Gas Association, said, “We applaud Administrator Pruitt’s decision to take a more balanced approach and give this rule a more thorough review than the

previous administration did.”

Democratic members of New Mexico’s congressional delegation and religious, environmental and Latino groups in the state have expressed support for the methane rules, saying they will help the industry capture more fuel that can be sold, while protecting the environment and public health.

The EPA announcement comes as oil and gas production is increasing in the Permian Basin in southeast New Mexico and West Texas.

In the last year, the number of rigs in the region has increased from 19 to 58, with seven new rigs added in the last week alone, according to data published by Baker Hughes, one of the world’s largest oil field service companies, and first reported by the *Carlsbad Current-Argus*.

Singer said “to not be controlling methane production and waste at the outset of the well’s life is when the biggest problem arises” because that is when wells release the most pollutants.

Pruitt’s delay in implementation of the methane rule was the latest in a series of executive orders and EPA initiatives from the Trump administration to reverse climate policies implemented under the previous administration.

In early March, the EPA said it would no longer require oil and gas companies to disclose extensive information about their methane emissions. The disclosures were called burdensome by the industry, and Pruitt agreed.

Contact Rebecca Moss at 986-3011 or rmoss@sfnwmexican.com.