

The Declining Trend in Natural Gas Emissions

Efforts Underway that will Continue that Trend



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The American Gas Association (AGA) believes that natural gas is poised to serve as a foundation fuel for the U.S. economy for years to come. This prospect has increased attention on methane emissions from natural gas systems. While methane is a greenhouse gas, natural gas produces far less carbon dioxide than coal or oil when combusted and serves as a clean, affordable complement to renewable energy.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the annual natural gas emissions rate per unit of natural gas production in 2012 was estimated to be 1.3 percent. And of that, only 0.24 percent was emitted from systems operated by local natural gas utilities.

Safety is the top priority for natural gas utilities, and due to continuing efforts to modernize infrastructure and enhance pipeline safety, natural gas emissions are on a declining trend. Natural gas utilities are committed to systematically upgrading infrastructure, driven by risk-based integrity management programs, and there is a growing effort to accelerate the replacement of pipelines no longer fit for service. Because of these continuing efforts, natural gas emissions from utility-owned distribution systems have dropped 22 percent since 1990, even as the industry added nearly 600,000 miles of distribution mains and service lines to serve 17.5 million more customers, an increase of 32 percent. Nearly 90 percent of the emissions declines from distribution systems since 1990 are due to pipeline replacements. AGA members are committed to continuing this positive trend.

Safety First

Emissions are already declining because of the natural gas distribution industry's focus on pipeline safety. This trend will continue as natural gas utilities continue to focus investments on modernizing infrastructure. Leak detection and repair programs already promptly address leaks that could pose a safety risk.

Balance Consumer Costs

Natural gas utilities are regulated by state utility commissions which are charged with balancing the need for investments in infrastructure to provide safe and reliable service with ensuring affordable energy bills for customers and fair returns on equity that will attract capital at reasonable costs.

Support Accelerated Cost Recovery for Pipeline Replacement

There are already 38 states that have adopted specific accelerated infrastructure replacement mechanisms to allow natural gas distribution utilities to recover the costs on a timely basis to replace and upgrade systems.

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Where it makes sense, AGA supports adoption of this approach in additional states to facilitate accelerated pipe replacement programs.

Support Emissions Measurement Research

Improved science and data collection is essential to inform the public debate about natural gas emissions and to support the recognition of the benefits of using natural gas to reduce emissions. AGA and its members have participated in several peer-reviewed scientific studies to collect current, accurate measurements of emissions from natural gas utility operations. AGA supports future studies to fill any remaining data gaps or to build a more robust data set if needed to reduce uncertainty regarding emissions and improve the calculated emission factors that EPA uses in its emissions inventory. AGA encourages fact-based dialogue and decision making regarding both emissions and cost-effective measures to reduce emissions.

Identification of Cost-Effective Best Practices

AGA has supported EPA's Natural Gas STAR program continuously since its inception in 1992, and AGA members have participated in this program to identify and deploy cost-effective technologies and operational practices for reducing natural gas emissions. AGA will continue to identify cost-effective methods that could be deployed where practicable and consistent with maintaining pipeline safety and affordable energy bills for consumers.

Encourage Upstream Suppliers to Identify and Deploy Cost-effective Best Practices for Reducing Natural Gas Emissions

AGA understands that to secure the full potential of natural gas as a foundation fuel for a clean energy future, it is important for the full value chain to have factual data regarding methane emissions. AGA will work collaboratively to support efforts by producers, gatherers, processors, and interstate pipeline operators to identify and deploy cost-effective best practices for reducing natural gas emissions across the value chain where practical.

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