

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

August 27, 2020

The Honorable Andrew Wheeler
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Administrator Wheeler:

We are writing to express our deep concern over the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) finalizing new rules that would rescind limits on methane pollution from the oil and gas industry. These rollbacks are another blatant example of this Administration's disregard for public health and the environment— and it is especially unsettling given the growing evidence linking exposure to air pollution to more severe cases of COVID-19.¹

These new rules weaken EPA's ability to limit dangerous methane pollution from the oil and gas sector. If these rules take effect, oil and gas companies will no longer be required to detect and repair methane leaks. In addition, these rules will rescind limits on methane emissions from large pipelines, storage sites, and other parts of the transmission system, which all are major sources of toxic pollution in the oil and gas supply chain. Emissions of smog-forming volatile organic compounds, toxic air pollutants, and greenhouse gases will go unabated as a result, threatening the health and safety of the surrounding communities and fueling climate change.

This rollback not only comes at a time when our country is battling a global health pandemic, but it also comes amidst growing evidence linking climate change and exposure to air pollution with maternal health risks. Research shows that pregnant women exposed to high temperatures and air pollution have a higher risk of giving birth to children who are premature, underweight, or stillborn.² Preterm births are associated with higher rates of infant deaths and can lead to adverse health outcomes like breathing

¹ Wu, Xiao and Rachel C. Nethery. *COVID-19 PM2.5, A National Study on Long-Term Exposure to Air Pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States*. April 24, 2020. Accessed August 14, 2020. <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>.

² Bekkar, Bruce, Susan Pacheco, Rupa Basu, and et al. *Association of Air Pollution and Heat Exposure with Preterm Birth, Low Birth Weight, and Stillbirth in the US*. June 18, 2020. Accessed August 20, 2020.

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2767260>.

problems, developmental delays, and cerebral palsy.³ What's more, research shows that these risks are significantly higher for Black mothers and babies than the population at large. EPA's recent rollback will increase planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions and local air pollution, exacerbating these disproportionate health impacts on women of color.

Additionally, in a July 2020 report,⁴ researchers found that expecting mothers living within a three-mile residual proximity to natural gas flaring at oil and gas production sites had a 30% greater risk of giving birth prematurely than those who did not live nearby, and exposure to 10 or more flares led to a 50% risk. Of further concern is that the impacts of flaring were present only among Hispanic women; non-Hispanic white women, who comprised a third of the mothers in the study, did not see an increased risk.

Oil and gas production facilities are historically located in or near communities of color—and as a result, communities of color are exposed to higher levels of air pollution. More than 1 million Black Americans⁵ and 1.81 million Hispanic Americans⁶ live within a half-mile of oil and gas production facilities.

These same communities are also grappling with racial disparities in maternal and infant health outcomes. The rate of preterm births among Hispanic women is more than 12 percent higher than non-Hispanic white mothers, and nearly one out of every four Hispanic infants is born premature.⁷ The rate of black mothers who die is 3.3 times greater than whites, and these racial disparities persist even when factoring for social status, income, and education.⁸ Contributing factors to these inequalities are implicit racial bias in the health care system, barriers to accessing health care services, and the physical and physiological effects of structural racism. Despite this mounting evidence, the Trump administration continues across its agencies to dismantle rules designed to limit air pollution, slow climate change, and protect our health.

³ CDC, *Reproductive Health, Maternal Infant Health, Preterm Birth*. October 21, 2019. Accessed August 12, 2020.

<https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternalinfanthealth/pretermbirth.htm>.

⁴ Lara J. Cushing, et al. *Flaring from Unconventional Oil and Gas Development and Birth Outcomes in the Eagle Ford Shale in South Texas*. July 15, 2020. Accessed August 12, 2020.

<https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/pdf/10.1289/EHP6394>.

⁵ Lesley Fleischman, et al, *Fumes Across the Fence-Line, The Health Impacts of Air Pollution from Oil & Gas on African American Communities*, November 2017. Accessed August 12, 2020.

https://www.naacp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Fumes-Across-the-Fence-Line_NAACP-and-CATF-Study.pdf

⁶ Lesley Fleischman, et al, *Latino Communities at Risk, The Impact of Air Pollution from the Oil and Gas Industry*, September 2016. Accessed August 12, 2020 http://www.catf.us/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/CATF_Pub_LatinoCommunitiesAtRisk.pdf

http://www.catf.us/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/CATF_Pub_LatinoCommunitiesAtRisk.pdf

⁷March of Dimes Special Report. *Maternal and Infant Health in US Hispanic Populations: Prematurity and Related Health Indicators*. June 4, 2014. Accessed August 12, 2020.

https://www.marchofdimes.org/Peristats/pdf/lib/991/MOD_2014HispanicReport.pdf

⁸ Patti Neighmond, *Why Racial Gaps in Maternal Mortality Persist*, May 10, 2019. Accessed August 12, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/05/10/722143121/why-racial-gaps-in-maternal-mortality-persist>

The job of EPA is to protect human health, but this administration continues to put our health in danger, failing in its fundamental duty. This especially impacts Black and brown communities that historically have been burdened with cumulative pollution impacts – and who are now experiencing disproportionate rates of and deaths from COVID-19. We cannot ignore the racial disparities in health outcomes.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please feel free to have your staff reach out to Sara Jordan (Sara.Jordan@mail.house.gov) and Betsey Coulbourn (Bestey.Coulbourn@mail.house.gov).

Sincerely,



Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress



Lauren Underwood
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren
Member of Congress

Brenda L. Lawrence

Nanette Diaz Barragán

Richard J. Durbin

Raúl M. Grijalva

Bobby L. Rush

Chris Van Hollen

Debbie Dingell

Jahana Hayes

Dianne Feinstein

Katie Porter

Alcee L. Hastings

Margaret Wood Hassan

Grace F. Napolitano

Jamie Raskin

Jeffrey A. Merkley

Deb Haaland

Gwen S. Moore

Michael F. Bennett

Steve Cohen

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Tammy Baldwin

Ayanna Pressley

Michael F.Q. San Nicolas

Edward J. Markey

Tony Cárdenas

Kathy Castor

Thomas R. Carper

Jan Schakowsky