

Heat Waves And Wildfires Give Urgency To The Fight To Cut Methane

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A sustainability scientist investigating complex human-nature systems

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Grant Douglas pauses while evacuating as the Park Fire jumps Highway 36 near Paynes Creek in Tehama ... [\[+\]](#) ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's no secret that the planet is getting warmer. We all feel it, from the extreme heat killing humans and animals in the Middle East and India to the massive wildfires devastating communities in western U.S. and Canada. Last week, the United Nations secretary-general António Guterres issued an

urgent [call to action on extreme heat](#) after the planet set a record for its hottest days ever.

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Climate change is now a reality for us all, and the extreme heat we feel is what unites us in this divided world.

Many of us recognize carbon dioxide as the primary greenhouse gas causing global warming. So, we know that it's important to do everything we can to decarbonize our economies and transition away from CO₂.

But is that it?

CH₄, aka methane, is another very important greenhouse gas that we don't hear enough about. Methane is more potent and warms the planet [tens of times](#) faster than carbon dioxide. Despite its lack of fame in the media, this climate pollutant is currently enjoying its fastest growth since the 1980s. And cutting methane emissions comes with an immediate environmental and health benefit: reducing air pollution.

Without a serious and immediate focus on methane, humans cannot meet their climate goals and bend the global warming curve.

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The burned remains of a vehicle in Jasper, Alberta on July 26, 2024. Rain and cooler temperatures ...

[+] POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

You might be surprised to learn that the methane emissions from the food and agriculture sector (40%) are more than that of the energy—fossil fuel—sector (35%). Yes, the methane produced by livestock (32%) is more than the methane produced from oil and gas (23%). That is an assuring piece of information for vegans, as eating less meat and dairy products can drastically reduce methane emissions. However, rice cultivation also emits enormous amounts of methane (8%), comparable to the methane emissions from coal (12%). Organic waste (landfills and wastewater) is the third most important contributor to human-caused methane production, reiterating the significant importance of reducing food consumption and waste.

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Due to its chemical structure, methane can trap more heat in the atmosphere, making it over 80 times more harmful than CO₂ in the first 20 years after its release. This greenhouse gas is responsible for one-third of total warming since the Industrial Revolution. But this is not the whole story. Methane is also a major contributor to the formation of ozone, a detrimental air pollutant that harms humans, ecosystems, and agricultural production. Annually, half a million premature deaths across the world are caused by the ozone resulting from human-caused methane production.

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In July 2024, the Earth recorded its hottest days ever. Billions worldwide suffered through ... [+] GETTY

So why, for so long, was nobody talking about it?

There could be several reasons for this. But an important one is methane's invisibility. This pollutant is, or maybe was, very hard to track. So, for a long time, we didn't have a clear picture of where some of the methane was coming from (such as leaks from oil and gas extraction, processing, and distribution equipment), nor was there a consensus on how to estimate it. Technological innovations and scientific breakthroughs were game changers, creating a lot of hope and momentum, necessary for sparking effective policy actions at the global level.

We can now identify large methane-emitting areas using satellites and remote sensing. We also have access to a diverse range of technological products and a growing body of scientific literature on the most practical ways to fight methane emissions. Decades of advocacy efforts and increasing global awareness about methane have encouraged the development of various partnerships and platforms for tracking methane and fostering

actionable mitigation and policy solutions, such as the [Climate and Clean Air Coalition](#), United Nations Environmental Programme's [International Methane Emissions Observatory](#), Global Methane Initiative, Country Methane Abatement Tool, Methane Roadmap Action Programme, and United Nations University's [Sustainability Nexus AID Programme](#).

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Just three years ago, the international community launched the [Global Methane Pledge](#), a voluntary commitment to reduce human-made methane emissions by 30% within only a decade. So far, 158 countries (including the EU), responsible for over 50% of global anthropogenic methane emissions, have joined this movement with the potential to prevent 0.2 degrees Celsius (0.36 degrees Fahrenheit) warming by 2050, 26 million tons of crop losses, 73 billion hours of lost labor due to extreme heat, 775,000 asthma-related hospitalizations, and 255,000 premature deaths every year.

Over the past 10 years, 115 companies from more than 60 countries, producing 40% of the world's oil and gas, have joined the [Oil and Gas Methane Partnership](#) to ensure more accurate and transparent methane reporting in the oil and gas industry. Last year, at COP28 in the United Arab Emirates, 50 companies representing more than 40% of global oil production signed on to the Oil and Gas Decarbonization Charter, committing to net-zero operations by 2050 and ending routine flaring by 2030. Most of the signatories were national oil and gas companies, including some major ones like Saudi Aramco, Azerbaijan's SOCAR, and Libya's NOC.



A French farmer refuels a van powered by biomethane at a filling station on the farm of the Guerin ...

[+] AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Focusing on methane is a no-brainer. It's not only necessary but also good for our health, planet, and wallet. While the energy industry is increasing its attention to methane, the world's success in methane mitigation in the food and waste sectors remains limited, mainly due to the lack of financial resources and the large number of stakeholders involved. Yet, through responsible consumption, reduced food waste, and healthier diets, we can collectively play a major role in the fight against methane and climate change.

The heat is on. Before it's too late, we must rise to stop the rising levels of methane. COP 29, the upcoming UN climate change conference in Azerbaijan, presents a significant opportunity for countries worldwide to step up, work together, and invest in deploying the available solutions to accelerate the urgent fight against methane.

The cost of action is not necessarily low, but the cost of inaction will definitely be high.

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