

## E&E Energywire

### Gas flaring reaches levels not seen in a decade — report

Carlos Anchondo, E&E News reporter

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Gas flaring increased 3% from 2018 to 2019, with the United States, Russia and Venezuela primarily responsible for the uptick, according to a new report. Department of the Interior

Gas flaring in the United States increased 23% last year, contributing to global levels of the practice that have not been "seen in more than a decade," according to a new report.

The **analysis** from the World Bank yesterday found that the United States flared the third-largest amount of gas in the world from 2018 to 2019, following Russia and Iraq. Globally, the volume of gas flaring — in which surplus gas is burned off into the air — increased 3%, rising from 145 billion to 150 billion cubic meters.

"Our data suggests that gas flaring continues to be a persistent problem, with solutions remaining difficult or uneconomic in certain countries," said Christopher Sheldon, practice manager in the Energy & Extractives Global Practice at the World Bank, in a statement.

The **report** said the COVID-19 pandemic and weakened oil prices could cause sustainability and climate concerns to be put on the back burner.

"To minimize COVID-19 impacts, reduce emissions, and accelerate the energy transition, the commitment of governments and companies to end routine gas flaring is essential," the report said.

Zubin Bamji, program manager for the World Bank's Global Gas Flaring Reduction Partnership, said the 23% increase in the U.S. volume of flared gas last year is mostly the result of increased oil production, primarily shale oil developments.

Flaring intensity — the amount of gas that's flared per unit of oil produced — in the United States increased nearly 12% from 2018 to 2019, according to [data](#) from the partnership, although it remains low compared with countries such as Syria and Cameroon.

However, gas flaring dropped "significantly" — by 10% — in the United States in the first quarter of 2020, the report added. That occurred despite an increase in oil production because of "improved utilization of the associated gas" during the period.

"If these trends continue, we are likely to see a significant drop in gas flaring in the United States in 2020, which would be a very helpful development," Bamji said in an email.

A spokesperson for EPA directed E&E News to the U.S. Energy Information Administration when asked for agency comment on the World Bank report.

Nicole Jacobs, a spokesperson for Energy in Depth — a project of the Independent Petroleum Association of America — said the United States' low flaring intensity is "a testament to the fact that U.S. environmental standards are among the highest in the world."

Jacobs criticized environmental activists for their legal battles against pipelines — which helped to sink the Atlantic Coast pipeline earlier this month — and said the biggest obstacles to progress on flaring are anti-pipeline groups, "who are ironically the loudest to complain about flaring."

Colin Leyden, director of regulatory and legislative affairs at the Environmental Defense Fund, said comparing U.S. flaring intensity with that of countries with lax environmental regulations or limited infrastructure is "problematic."

Leyden pointed to EDF research on the Permian Basin — which straddles parts of Texas and New Mexico — where he said the performance of flares is "abysmal." Approximately 11% are malfunctioning at any given time there, Leyden said, and 5% of flares are completely unlit, "meaning they're venting all the gas directly into the atmosphere."

"What we're finding is that not only are flares sort of a symptom or an example of waste and air pollution, they're also a significant source of methane pollution in the oil field in the Permian Basin," Leyden said.

"It's not a new field. It's not a developing country in Africa or the Middle East," Leyden said. "If industry can't get it right in the Permian, it's questionable they can get it right anywhere, and that's why it's imperative for us to move toward a future, very quickly, of no routine flaring in the oil field."

## States make moves

The World Bank's report comes amid growing pressure for U.S. states to address flaring and the release of methane — the primary component of natural gas. Methane is a greenhouse gas whose impact is 25 times greater than that of carbon dioxide over a 100-year period, according to EPA.

On Monday, New Mexico — the third-biggest oil-producing state — released draft rules meant to reduce methane emissions from its oil and gas industry ([Energywire](#), July 21). Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham (D) has pledged that her administration will have regulations in place by the end of the year. She reiterated that commitment yesterday in a [tweet](#) saying, "We're going to continue to be a leader in reducing harmful emissions. This was a Day One priority for me. It will never change."

On a conference call with reporters, the secretary of New Mexico's Environment Department, James Kenney, and the secretary of its Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, Sarah Cottrell Propst, said the rules are stricter than those of Colorado and other states, but stressed that they're designed to give companies flexibility in finding ways to comply.

Kenney, asked if the proposal would cost the oil industry jobs, said the state could cut pollution while preserving employment.

"We don't have to pick a sucker's choice," he said.

Regulators in Texas are also weighing flaring and emissions of methane.

Andrew Keese, a spokesman for the Texas Railroad Commission (RRC) — a state agency that regulates energy production in Texas — said last week that agency staff will present a plan of action on flaring to RRC commissioners at a conference early next month.

Morgan Bazilian, director of the Payne Institute and a professor of public policy at the Colorado School of Mines, said the global and U.S. increase in flaring is "deeply worrying," but added that U.S. flaring per barrel remains very low compared with the rest of the world.

"This shows good practice in the industry," Bazilian said in an email. "Nevertheless the scale is what matters to people in terms of local pollutants, and the global population in terms of greenhouse gas emissions and wasted resources."