

Testimony of Patrice Tomcik
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U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
Cutting Methane Pollution: Safeguarding Health, Creating Jobs, and Protecting Our Climate
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Chair Castor, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the Select Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to speak about cutting methane pollution.

I commend each of you for your commitment to protecting our health and climate while creating jobs.

I am Patrice Tomcik, a Senior National Field Manager for Moms Clean Air Force. Moms Clean Air Force is a community of more than 1 million moms and dads nationwide united to protect our children's health from air pollution and climate change. We envision a safe and equitable future where all children breathe clean air and live in a stable climate.

I am the mother of two boys living in the town of Gibsonia located in Southwest Pennsylvania on top of the Marcellus Shale where oil and gas operations are widespread with many located within communities like mine. I am here in person today to emphasize how important it is for frontline community members to literally be in the room as climate and air pollution discussions are happening with lawmakers and agencies.

Methane is a potent greenhouse gas responsible for over a quarter of current global warming, and the oil and gas sector is the nation's largest industrial source of methane pollution. In the US, it is estimated that the oil and gas industry emits more than 16 million metric tons of methane pollution annually – the equivalent of the climate pollution from all of the nation's passenger vehicles in a year. Methane is the principal component of natural gas.

Climate change is causing a health crisis – and it's happening right now. We see it when extreme storms cause devastating flooding; when smoke from record-breaking wildfires can poison the air for millions across the West; when severe heat waves regularly threaten public health, preying on older adults, pregnant women, and low-income communities. Especially at risk are Black, Indigenous, and Latino communities who are disproportionately exposed to the effects from climate change and harmful pollution from oil and gas operations.

We need environmental justice. We need climate justice. And we need it now.

In the US, more than 17 million people live within a half mile of an active oil and gas operations and more than 3.9 million children go to school within a half mile of oil and gas operations that puts their health at risk.

My children attend the Mars Area School District where there are unconventional gas wells and a spider web network of gathering pipelines. The closest gas wells that have been fracked are approximately a half mile away from my children's 5-school campus that puts 3,200 students' health at risk.

Oil and gas operations not only emit climate warming methane but also harmful volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Both can contribute to ground level ozone, or smog. Smog is a lung irritant that triggers asthma attacks and increases lung infections. Children have a higher respiratory rate than adults and thus can be exposed to higher rates of air pollution than adults. In our family, my boys both play outdoor sports for school. I am very concerned about what they are breathing into their still-developing lungs.

In addition, VOCs such as benzene are emitted by oil and gas operations. Benzene can affect lung development in children and increase the risk of immune system damage, neurological and developmental problems, adverse birth outcomes, and even cancer such as childhood leukemia.

As a parent of a child who had leukemia, I know first-hand how critical clean air is to good health. In fact, it was my youngest son Carson's cancer journey that motivated me to speak up about protecting children's health –and long before the first gas well was fracked near the school. Yet, every day I send my children to school, I fear for their health. This is especially true for Carson who is at a higher risk of having cancer again.

My children and children across the nation need strong federal standards to create baseline methane protections, especially for states that have failed to enact meaningful oil and gas methane protections. This is why it is so important that the EPA finalize a comprehensive methane rule to eliminate routine flaring, require the use of non-polluting equipment and include frequent inspections for smaller, leak-prone wells. Low-producing oil and gas wells are responsible for approximately half of the methane emitted from all well sites in the United States while accounting for only 6% of the nation's oil and gas production.

It is important that Congress properly funds the EPA to carry out the enforcement of rules in order to protect the health of communities. And as regulations and policies are being considered, there needs to be frequent consulting of environmental justice communities and communities living on the frontlines near oil and gas operations to influence decisions related to the design and implementation of rules and policies. This week EDF published a new study that combines location of active oil and gas wells with census tract data showing that in dozens of counties throughout the U.S. a disproportionately large number of communities of color, people living below the poverty line, older individuals and young children live near wells.

Parents can't control the air our children breathe; we depend on our leaders to do their jobs and protect them. Moms and dads want action on climate, and we want those who represent us in Washington —our members of Congress— to pass laws, incentives and funding that builds a clean energy future.

Every child has the right to breathe clean air, and the right to a stable climate.

Thank you.

Resources

- (1) <https://www.edf.org/media/new-epa-rules-will-cut-methane-pollution-thousands-oil-and-gas-facilities-benefit-millions#:~:text=EDF%20estimates%20the%20U.S.%20oil,and%20air%20toxics%20like%20benzene>
- (2) <https://oilandgasthreatmap.com/threat-map/>
- (3) <https://www.momscleanairforce.org/resources/how-oil-and-gas-operations-impact-your-babys-health/>
- (4) <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-022-29709-3>
- (5) <https://nam11.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.edf.org%2Fmedia%2Fstudy-explores-demographics-communities-living-near-oil-and-gas-wells&data=05%7C01%7Cptomcik%40edf.org%7C19d347ee348c4ee29d1508da53da48e6%7Cfe4574edbcfd4bf0bde843713c3f434f%7C0%7C0%7C637914494243881035%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWljoimC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQljoiv2luMzIiLCJBTiI6IklhaWwiLCJXVCi6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&data=So%2BSvTYQeC2UzwGJ%2FiTjZ9q17BBGfy6wUe39CK%2BmqX8%3D&reserved=0>