

Lies, Damned Lies & Methane

What would Mark Twain think about today's debate over methane being a significant driver of catastrophic man-caused global warming? We can only guess, but it seems likely he would be a skeptic.

As Twain once said, "There are three kinds of Lies: Lies, damned lies and statistics."

Twain actually borrowed the concept from a British politician, but what both of them were saying was that numbers can be a powerful tool of deception.

We see it every day in such things as the unemployment rate that doesn't count the millions of people who've given up looking for work and the national debt that doesn't account for trillions of dollars in unfunded liabilities.

These kinds of deceptive numbers are found in countless other places as well—especially when it comes to energy and the environment.

For example, environmental activist groups are now sounding the alarm about methane being a powerful driver of climate change. Their argument is that in the production and transport of natural gas some unburned methane inevitably leaks into the atmosphere and when it does its global warming potential... or GWP... is far greater than carbon dioxide. They claim methane's GWP is a whopping 84 times greater than CO₂. Eighty-four times the impact! That's a pretty big and scary number. But where does this statistic come from and should it be believed?

In its greenhouse gas inventory, the Environmental Protection Agency uses a GWP for methane of 25 times that of CO₂. So how does the Environmental Defense Fund come up with a GWP more than three times that amount? Well...that's where Mark Twain's caution about deceptive numbers comes in.

In truth, once methane is released into the atmosphere, it immediately begins to disintegrate, lowering its Global Warming Potential. About 12 years later the methane has completely broken down into other elements... dramatically reducing its GWP.

In order to make methane sound a lot more threatening, EDF and other activist groups significantly shorten the time frame of its impact, which subsequently raises the GWP. You've heard of "sleight of hand". This is sleight of scale.

It should also be noted that even after taking into account its GWP of 25, methane only contributes 10% of the greenhouse gas emissions in the US and less than one-third of those emissions (31%) come from natural gas and petroleum systems.

Here's the more interesting story when it comes to methane. In the past 25 years the United States has increased natural gas production by 55 percent. And while all that growth in production has been going on, methane emissions have been driven down by 16 percent because oil and gas companies have become a lot more proficient in finding and stopping leaks. The trend lines indicate the industry will continue to produce ever increasing amounts of gas for heating, cooking, industrial development, agriculture, and product manufacturing while reducing the amount of methane lost.

It's no coincidence that the wealthy people funding the Environmental Defense Fund and other activist groups are heavily invested in wind and solar power. Their not-so-subtle end game is to drive up the cost of natural gas production through expensive regulations, thereby making solar and wind power more competitive.

That's why EDF alone spent \$136 million dollars in 2014 trying to influence public opinion. More importantly, the activists are trying to pressure lawmakers to create ever more costly regulations on how natural gas is produced and sent to the consumer. That increased cost is passed onto you in virtually everything you purchase and everything you do.

Now...there is also some irony here. If the goal of eco-activist groups is really to lower the threat of global warming they would not be trying to drive up the cost of natural gas. As the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has made clear, "[T]he rapid deployment of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal-drilling technologies, which has increased and diversified the gas supply... is an important reason for a reduction of GHG emissions in the United States."

In other words...more natural gas production has translated into a reduced percentage of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere.

Mark Twain warned us that we should be highly skeptical when numbers are being thrown around. He was right.

ALLIANCE