

Dirty Biogas Has No Place in Los Angeles' or California's Clean Energy Future

California and Los Angeles are considering measures to promote so-called biogas (sometimes called biomethane or renewable natural gas) as part of a transition to renewable energy. Top proponents of biogas include the natural gas and fracking industries that are greenwashing their dirty energy production. Biogas or biomethane includes waste methane from landfills, sewage treatment plants and livestock manure. But the prefix “bio” does not make it clean — it is the same methane as is in fracked gas with the same greenhouse gas pollutants.¹ It has no place in a clean energy future.

In 2016, the Los Angeles City Council directed the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) to explore a 100 percent renewable energy plan.² LADWP has proposed plans that have included biogas as a possible renewable energy source.³ The California legislature is considering two pieces of legislation that promote biogas expansion.⁴

Biogas is pure greenwashing for the fracking and natural gas industries that want to distract from fracking's water pollution and fossil fuel infrastructure risks, like the disaster at the Aliso Canyon gas storage facility.

Biogas Is Dirty Energy

California already considers waste gas from landfills, sewage treatment plants and factory farm waste — often called biogas — as renewable energy under several state programs.⁵ Burning biogas releases greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and other pollutants including smog-forming nitrogen oxides, ammonia and hydrogen sulfide.⁶ Natural gas companies, like SoCalGas, have promoted biogas to greenwash it as “renewable natural gas.”⁷

Factory farm manure digesters: In 2017, nine California dairy farms with nearly 40,000 total cows digested manure into power that supplied the electricity grid.⁸ Most California factory-farmed dairy cows were in the Central Valley, a region plagued by high poverty and the highest rates of emergency room visits related to childhood asthma in the state.⁹ Manure digesters have received government subsidies, and methane combustion emissions, methane leaks, accidental manure spills and explosions mean that digesters provide neither clean nor safe energy.¹⁰ Digester subsidies and on-farm power generation create incentives to expand the unsustainable, environmentally destructive and socially unjust factory farm food production system.



Landfill gas: In 2016, California had 81 landfills generating electricity from methane digesters with histories of water contamination, methane leaks and nitrogen oxide emissions.¹¹ In 2011, a San Jose landfill digester faced an \$882,200 fine for a chemical spill the previous year that contaminated a nearby creek with toxic pollutants.¹² Landfill gases can leak into nearby soil and buildings, posing a potential explosion hazard and threatening public health.¹³

Digesters are expensive, inefficient and polluting, and they primarily generate power for the facilities themselves. Approximately two-thirds of the energy from sewage gas digesters and half of the energy from manure digesters may be needed to power the digesters themselves.¹⁴ The world's largest sewage power facility, in Washington, D.C., powers the digester but only supplies one-third of the complex's energy needs.¹⁵

Greenwashing Fracking and Dirty Biogas

The natural gas industry pushes the “renewable natural gas” narrative to justify the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure and to greenwash fracking. Proponents say that the supposedly clean biogas could be pumped into the existing natural gas pipeline network, further entrenching natural gas infrastructure.¹⁶ Methane from fracked gas or biogas is a potent greenhouse gas, nearly 90 times more powerful than carbon dioxide.¹⁷ Gas pipelines, storage facilities and other infrastructure leak tremendous volumes of methane that contribute to climate change. SoCalGas’ Aliso Canyon gas storage facility was the site of the worst methane leak in history, which displaced 8,000 families.¹⁸

Investing in natural gas infrastructure prolongs fossil fuel dependence, delays the shift to clean renewable energy and

forestalls meaningful reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The proposed California bills supported by the Renewable Gas Coalition, including member SoCalGas, would consider funding biogas connections to the gas pipeline system and require utilities to buy biogas.¹⁹ These measures would justify and promote the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure that threatens the climate and communities across California.

Dirty biogas has no place in a truly clean energy future for Los Angeles and California

The fracking and natural gas industries are promoting biogas to greenwash their climate-destroying industry. Dirty biogas releases greenhouse gases and other air pollutants but generates little reliable power. Contact your California legislators and Los Angeles City Councilmembers TODAY and urge them to reject biogas fwwat.ch/StopBiogasCA.

Endnotes

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