Hochul removes looser methane emission rules from budget talks

Change would have eased pollution rules; administration cited steep costs involved

Rick Karlin
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Facing an unexpected firestorm of opposition from environmentalists, Gov. Kathy Hochul on Wednesday removed from budget negotiations a proposal to ease the rules regarding New York’s methane emissions in future years.

Lori Van Buren/Times Union
ALBANY — Facing an unexpected firestorm of opposition from environmentalists, Gov. Kathy Hochul on Wednesday removed from budget negotiations a proposal to ease the rules regarding methane emissions in future years.

“That’s a fair way to put it. It’s not that we won’t be taking up the matter,” said Doreen Harris, president and CEO of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority.

She and state Environmental Conservation Commissioner Basil Seggos have been the point people for Hochul on climate issues.

They both agreed, under questioning by reporters on Wednesday, that the methane proposal would be revisited after the 2023-24 state budget is completed, and perhaps after the state Legislature finishes its session in late June.
The proposal, which was first reported by Politico, would have extended from 20 to 100 years the period over which methane gas emissions are accounted for.

That accounting will be used in an upcoming cap and invest, or carbon tax, that is also mandated in the state's 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, or CLPA, which is designed to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

While initially pegged at a 20-year period, administration planners started discussing the 100-year plan as the budget was taking shape, saying recent data suggested a 20-year plan would constrict allowable methane emissions so much that there would be a sharp spike in gasoline and home heating costs with natural gas.

The proposed change, however, drew a rapid backlash from two dozen environmental and climate activist organizations that viewed it as a betrayal of the CLCPA, which had been under development since 2019.

“It would act as a cheat,” said Liz Moran, policy advocate for Earthjustice, one of the groups opposing the change. “It would raise questions as to whether we need to go back and undo the scoping plan and all the work the council has done for the past four years,” she added, referring to the so-called roadmap for fighting greenhouse gases devised by a special Climate Action Council.
Activists rallied in the Capitol against the proposed change earlier in the week, and a number of lawmakers also joined in, suggesting that the proposal could become another stumbling block to completing a state budget.

The budget was supposed to be completed April 1 but has gone into overtime, as it often does, as lawmakers and the governor continue to disagree on a number of issues ranging from income taxes, to bail reform, to charter schools.

Seeing the blowback, Hochul and her team may have determined that the methane issue could be revisited at a later date. Seggos and Harris also have not planned to outright abandon the 100-year timeline, which was how some climate activists described the move.

“NY Renews is proud to stand with a movement that stopped — for now — changes to New York’s progressive 20-year methane accounting method as written in law. Our coalition will continue to defend against changes to our state’s Climate Act,” read a prepared statement from NY Renews, one of the state’s major climate coalitions.
“It doesn’t sound like they’ve completely abandoned it,” added Moran.

Seggos and Harris said they would among other things explore ways to ease the burden of higher energy costs on consumers under tougher new emission rules.

One source of money for that could be a special new fund created by the cap and invest, or carbon tax, program that is being put in place.

Seggos stressed that putting rules and guidelines for that new program is a priority, since the Climate law calls for that to be completed by the end of 2023.

“There are other tools that we may need to bring to bear,” he said.

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Rick Karlin covers the environment and energy development for the Times Union. Has previously covered education and state government and wrote about natural resources and state government in Colorado and Maine. You can reach him at rkarlin@timesunion.com or 518-454-5758.
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