

UN FLAGS 127 MAJOR CLIMATE-WARMING METHANE PLUMES THIS YEAR

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A handout screen grab from thermographic video footage shot with an infrared camera and made available to Reuters June 10, 2021 by Clean Air Task Force (CATF), shows what appears to be a plume of methane gas flowing from a vent stack at the SNAM underground storage facility in Minerbio, Italy. | Photo Credit: Reuters

A United Nations-led effort to use space satellites to detect methane leaks from fossil fuel infrastructure has alerted governments to 127 major methane plumes across four continents since its launch at the start of this year.

Methane is a potent greenhouse gas, with 80 times the warming power of carbon dioxide over a 20-year period. Such emissions from the burning of fossil fuels so far have driven about a third of global warming.

The U.N. Environment Programme's (UNEP) Methane Alert and Response System (MARS) was created to support a 2021 global pledge by more than 150 countries to cut methane emissions by 30% by 2030.

In a report published on Friday, UNEP said the system was fully operational and providing satellite data to companies and governments on leaky fossil fuel infrastructure found to be emitting several metric tons of methane per hour.

"Every kilogram of methane matters, but what we can see from our satellites is only the most outrageous of those emissions," said Manfredi Caltagirone, head of UNEP's International Methane Emissions Observatory.

Restricting leaks, as well as routine venting and flaring, from oil and gas wells and equipment is one of the fastest ways to curb methane emissions, which are often invisible to the naked eye and for the most part odorless.

While satellites picked up more than 127 major plumes in 2023, some appeared short-lived and therefore too hard to trace, he said. MARS also only works with national governments with whom they have an ongoing collaboration.

Super-emitting events such as these are responsible for between 8% and 12% of methane

emissions from the oil and gas industry.

One leak in Argentina was found in March 2023 to be emitting roughly 5.8 metric tons of methane every hour, the report said. That is equivalent to the emissions of about 100 passenger vehicles over a year in a single hour.

MARS sent a notification to the Argentinian government alerting them to the plume, which was then resolved.

It is so far unclear how many of the other 126 leaks were plugged, Caltagirone said.

Delegates at this year's U.N. COP28 climate summit that began Thursday in Dubai are seeking practical solutions to curbing methane.

This could include providing financial support for developing countries' efforts and national regulations over methane-emitting sectors such as oil and gas and agriculture.

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