

Drop the 'natural' in natural gas, climate activists urge US officials

April 27 2023, by Jennifer A Dlouhy, Bloomberg News



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Since almost two centuries ago—not long after it was identified bubbling

up in a creek in western New York—the flammable below-ground substance composed of methane and other hydrocarbons has been called "natural gas" in the U.S.

Now, some [environmental activists](#) say it's time to ditch that label.

"There's nothing natural about fracking; there's nothing natural about thousands of miles of pipelines and there's nothing natural about the [indoor air pollution](#) that is associated with gas," said Caleb Heeringa, campaign director of the environmental advocacy group Gas Leaks.

Heeringa and other environmentalists are pushing federal regulators to set a policy discouraging companies from using the term "natural gas" in marketing, arguing it inaccurately casts the substance as a clean, green source of energy. Alternatives pitched by activists include "methane gas" and "fossil gas."

Their campaign—which also seeks to curtail corporate overuse of other terms, including "sustainable" and "net-zero"—aims to influence the Federal Trade Commission as it plans updates to its Green Guides, which govern environmental marketing claims. In kicking off the rewrite last year, Chair Lina Khan stressed that rising consumer interest in green products has spurred businesses to tout their sustainability. But when companies making these claims don't tell the truth, "it distorts the market for environmentally friendly products" and "puts honest companies who bear the costs of green business practices at a competitive disadvantage."

The FTC has long been the arbiter of when a company's claims are illegally "unfair and deceptive"—a statutory bar in the US meant to ensure consumers aren't misled. Companies that run afoul of the agency's guidance risk shareholder lawsuits and civil penalties.

This is the first update of the guidance since 2012, and over that time,

"climate has become so much more of an economic driver in a bunch of contexts," said Amanda Shanor, an assistant professor and communications law expert at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "It appears [the commissioners] are going to do something more significant than they have in the past."

The phrase "natural gas" was adopted in the 1820s to distinguish the product from manufactured gas produced by burning coal and oil. It is a naturally occurring substance, often formed underground from decomposed plants, animals and other organic material.

But environmentalists asking the FTC to discourage use of the term argue "natural" is now used strategically to obscure the climate consequences of gas while promoting it as a healthy option, often alongside images of green leaves and blue drops.

"The idea that this is just naturally occurring doesn't really relate to the reality of how it's marketed or how people perceive it," said Duncan Meisel, executive director of Clean Creatives, a campaign prodding the advertising industry to cut ties with fossil fuel clients. Instead, he said, "The word 'natural' plays a very vital role in the perception of the product."

Energy industry advocates call the campaign Orwellian. The appropriate way to balance debates about the environmental impacts of natural gas "is not to hijack the discussion with made-up terms," said Scott Segal, a Bracewell LLP partner who has represented oil industry clients.

"Attempting to change the name of a long-used commodity to suit political tastes of the day seems to be the complete opposite of FTC's mission," Segal said. "It makes the discussion more opaque and less accessible to the [general public](#)."

Michael Murray, general counsel with the American Gas Association, said the term "has a history of use colloquially and in reference works, legislation and [academic journals](#)," and that it is "instantly recognizable to customers for what it is: the name of a vital source of energy for tens of millions of Americans."

The Federal Trade Commission has said the Green Guides are based on how consumers reasonably interpret claims, not technical or scientific definitions.

Public surveys show how much the words matter. Some 77% of registered US voters in a 2021 Climate Nexus poll said they had a favorable opinion of natural gas. But when asked about methane—the prime ingredient in [natural gas](#)—only 29% had a similar view. A 2020 Yale University experiment had similar results.

The terminology can make it harder for well-meaning consumers to vote with their dollars in a crowded marketplace, said Tyler Lobdell, a staff attorney with Food and Water Watch. The advocacy group is urging the FTC to clamp down on the description of some foods as "sustainably" produced, arguing the description often obscures industrial farming techniques.

And there's a big drive to change the way companies use "net-zero"—a term that generally refers to the point at which they either stopped emitting greenhouse gases or fully offset them by investing in carbon-sucking forests and pollution-capturing technology.

Those assertions should be substantiated, said Leah Qusba, executive director of Action for the Climate Emergency. "If you are going to claim 'net-zero,' then you must have a plan, it must be evidence based and it must be independently verified," she said.

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Citation: Drop the 'natural' in natural gas, climate activists urge US officials (2023, April 27)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-04-natural-gas-climate-activists-urge.html>

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