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Advantage of burning gas over coal is easily lost

Sir, Yumehiko Hoshijima (Letters, March 21) is correct to challenge the myth that shale gas is going to benefit climate change. If methane emissions exceed 2 per cent of production, then the advantage of burning gas over coal is lost. Satellite observations over the US have demonstrated that exploratory fields release higher amounts of methane than established fields, with losses over Bakken and Eagle Ford representing 10 per cent of production.

Global levels of atmospheric methane plateaued in the 1990s but have started to increase again since 2008 in tandem with increased shale activity in North America. In 2016, a study by AJ Turner and co-workers from Harvard indicated that between 30 and 60 per cent of the global increase in atmospheric methane can be attributed to emissions from the US.

Oil companies maintain that these losses are the result of unregulated practices by cowboy operators, but storage and distribution also contributes to the problem as demonstrated by the massive methane leak that emanated from the Aliso Canyon blowout in 2015-16.

Substituting one fossil fuel with another as a way of solving climate change is no more sensible than the substitution of petrol by diesel.

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