

Briefing

How import rules can cut global methane emissions

Anna Kanduth, Claudio Forner

April 2026



Methane is one of the quickest levers available to slow warming in the near term, yet current policies are nowhere near enough to deliver the cuts needed by 2030. As governments look for ways to narrow that gap, methane import standards are emerging as a powerful new tool. This briefing explores how the European Union's new rules for imported oil, gas, and coal could drive emissions cuts far beyond its borders – and how, if other major importers follow, they could help close more than 40% of the gap to a 1.5°C-consistent methane pathway.

At current trade levels, an EU standard of 0.2% methane intensity could reduce emissions by more than 3 Mt CH₄ annually from its imports alone. Wider adoption by six other major importers could cut global methane emissions by over 10 Mt CH₄, driven in particular by Russia and the United States, which have the largest excess methane emissions relative to a 0.2% intensity standard.

Cutting methane is critical to limit overshoot

Overshooting the internationally agreed 1.5°C warming limit is now increasingly likely, as governments have failed to deliver emissions cuts at the pace and scale required. This policy shortfall means international climate action must now focus on limiting both the magnitude and duration of temperature overshoot, while working to bring warming back below 1.5°C by 2100.

While deep and sustained cuts in carbon dioxide are essential to correct course, reducing methane – a potent, but short-lived climate pollutant – is one of the most effective levers available to limit near-term warming, while also delivering immediate air quality benefits. Methane's importance has been recognised by the 160 governments who have signed the [Global Methane Pledge](#), calling for a 30% reduction in methane emissions between 2020 and 2030.

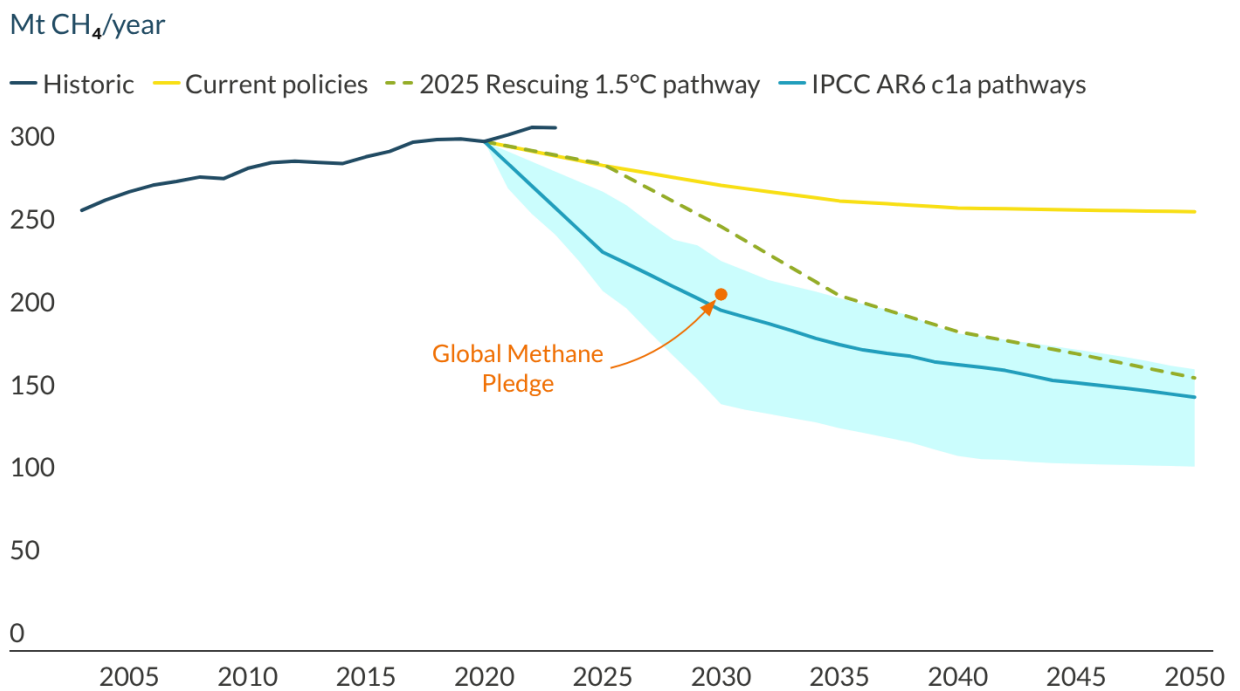
Recent analyses reinforce this urgency, showing that rapid methane reductions this decade are critical to limiting overshoot and rescuing the 1.5°C goal. A [recent study](#) from Climate Analytics and PIK found that achieving this goal requires global methane emissions to decline by at least 17%.¹ This represents a floor, not a ceiling, for global methane mitigation. Earlier Paris-compatible pathways assessed in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6)

¹ The reductions shown here for both the Climate Analytics study and IPCC AR6 differ from the originally reported values because the pathways have been harmonised to 2020 levels from [PRIMAP](#), which differs from the datasets used in the original studies.

show methane emissions falling by between 23 and 52% over the same period, with a median decline of 33.² However, these earlier pathways assumed that methane emissions would begin falling in 2020, whereas emissions have only continued to rise. While the latest 17% reduction is numerically lower than the cuts shown in the AR6 pathways, it is no less ambitious: higher-than-expected emissions mean that the necessary reductions must now occur faster and within a tighter time frame to align with a 1.5°C-consistent pathway.

Policy action remains insufficient to deliver these reductions. Under current policies, methane emissions are projected to fall by only about 9% between 2020 and 2030, leaving a 25 Mt shortfall to the upper range of the Paris-aligned pathways and a 66 Mt gap to the Global Methane Pledge (Figure 1).³

Figure 1: Methane gap between current policies and climate targets



Note: Emissions pathways are harmonised to a 2020 baseline consistent with the Global Methane Pledge. Historical values use PRIMAP to stay closely aligned with country-reported inventories. Other global datasets (e.g., EDGAR and CEDS) report substantially higher historical methane emissions due to methodological differences.

Source: Historical data : PRIMAP; Current policies and 2025 Rescuing 1.5°C pathway: REMIND 3.4; IPCC AR6 c1a pathways: IPCC.

² In our analysis, we use the C1a pathways from the AR6 report. These pathways are compatible with the long-term temperature goal of the Paris Agreement, which commits signatories to hold warming “well below 2°C” and pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5°C. See <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/climate-change-2022-mitigation-of-climate-change/2929481A59B59C57C743A79420A2F9FF>

³ The EU methane regulation is not included in this current policy pathway.

Ambitious methane reductions require both phasing out fossil fuels and targeted methane abatement

In all Paris-compatible pathways, methane emissions from the fossil fuel sector fall fastest and furthest.

Phasing out fossil fuels is one of the most effective ways to reduce both carbon dioxide and methane emissions from the sector, while also protecting economies from the volatility of global fossil fuel prices, economic damage from very high fuel prices and critical supply security issues threatening industry, agriculture and livelihoods. Limiting overshoot and returning warming well below 1.5°C by 2100 requires fossil fuels to peak immediately and then decline rapidly – first coal in the 2040s, then gas in the 2050s, and finally oil in the 2060s.

However, even as the transition accelerates, significant methane emissions will persist from remaining oil, gas, and coal operations. Targeted methane abatement – such as leak detection and repair and the elimination of non-emergency venting and flaring – provides an effective, complementary, and [cost-effective](#) strategy for achieving rapid methane reductions in the near term.

Methane import standards: a new tool to unlock methane reductions

While most government action to date has focused on cutting methane emissions from domestic production, import standards are emerging as a new tool to tackle methane beyond national borders. The [EU Methane Regulation](#), which entered into force in 2024, puts in place binding requirements to measure, report, verify, and reduce methane emissions across the oil, gas, and coal sectors. Operators are required to adopt the highest standards for measurement and reporting and take actions to reduce emissions, including enhanced leak detection and repair and limiting venting and flaring.

Critically, the regulation also applies to imported fossil fuels. With about [60% of the EU's fossil demand met by net imports](#), these standards extend the EU's climate influence into its global supply chain by requiring methane intensity improvements in exporting countries. The rules phase in gradually, beginning with requirements to increase transparency and reporting, and progressing to stricter methane controls over time. By August 2028, importers must report the methane intensity of their imports, and by August 2030, they must show that all imported fossil fuels meet a minimum

intensity threshold determined by the European Commission, though the threshold has not yet been set.

Quantifying the potential of methane import standards

To assess the potential impact of methane import rules to close the global emissions gap, our analysis explores what would happen if current fossil fuel trade were governed by stringent methane intensity production standards, such as those foreseen by the EU. It uses a new, comprehensive model that maps trade flows and methane emissions across 24 top exporting and 44 importing countries. Together, these products account for more than 80% of global oil, gas, and coal trade, as well as more than 95% of imports of these products into the countries included in our study.

While the EU has not yet established the official emissions intensity threshold it will apply to imports by 2030, the analysis applies a 0.2% methane intensity benchmark – the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative’s [industry standard](#) for best practice in upstream methane management.

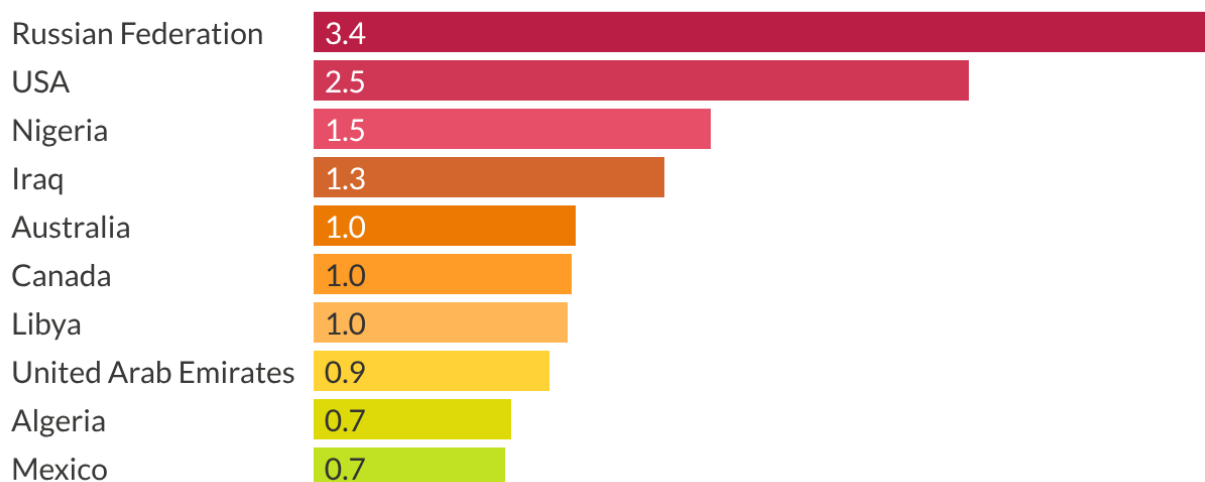
It’s important to note that the figures presented here reflect the maximum potential if the standard were applied to current trade volumes, patterns, and emissions intensities. This analysis does not account for future changes in market dynamics, under- or over-compliance with the import rules, or the introduction or parallel domestic methane regulations, as exist in the EU rules. For more information about the analysis, [read our technical report](#).

How import standards can close the methane mitigation gap

The analysis begins by assessing how current fossil fuel exports compare with a 0.2% methane intensity benchmark, both at a product level and at a country level. At the product level, almost all tracked fossil-fuel trade flows currently exceed this threshold. Natural gas exports, for example, average more than five times higher than the benchmark. At the country level, Russia and the United States stand out with the largest excess methane emissions from exports, putting them particularly at risk if stricter standards are adopted (Figure 2). Together, these findings highlight both the scale of the challenge and the significant opportunity for rapid emissions reductions if import standards drive improvements in exporter performance.

Figure 2: Top 10 exporters with excess methane above 0.2% intensity standard

Total excess methane (Mt CH₄)



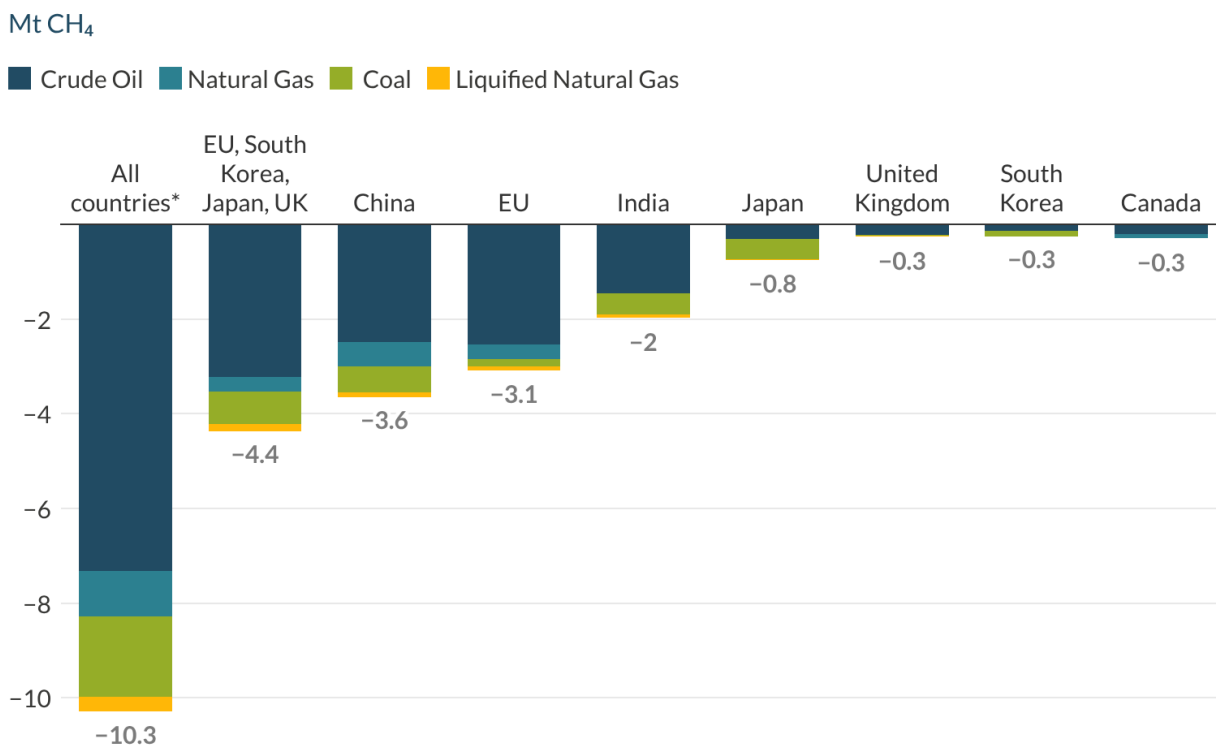
Next, the analysis examines the potential emissions reduction impact if major importers were to act. Specifically, it assesses how much methane could be reduced if seven major markets – the EU, China, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Canada – applied a 0.2% intensity standard to their imports (Figure 3).

Our analysis finds that, if applied to the EU's current fossil fuel imports, a 0.2% methane intensity standard could deliver about 3.1 Mt of CH₄ reductions annually – if imports fully complied with the standard. Compared with global methane emissions pathways and targets for 2030, these reductions would close about 12% of the global gap to the upper range of the Paris-aligned trajectory and 5% of the gap to the Global Methane Pledge.

Exploring the application of this standard in other countries shows that China – the world's largest fossil fuel importer – could trigger annual emissions reductions of up to 3.6 Mt CH₄. Compared to methane pathways in 2030, this alone would shrink the gap to the global 1.5°C pathway by 15%. The analysis also considers a scenario in which a coalition of four major importers – the EU, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Japan – adopts the same standard. These jurisdictions were selected because the EU has already passed binding methane import rules, and policy discussions on similar measures are actively underway in the [UK](#), [South Korea](#), and [Japan](#). Under this coalition scenario, combined reductions would reach 4.4 Mt CH₄, narrowing the gap by 18%. Applying the 0.2% standard across all seven countries assessed in our study would result in total annual emissions reductions of 10.3 Mt CH₄. When compared with projected methane pathways in 2030, this reduction would be equivalent to closing 41% of the gap to the

upper range of the 1.5°C-consistent pathway. The bulk of these reductions would be generated in Russia (27%), followed by Iraq (11%), and the United States (10%).

Figure 3: Estimated annual reductions from applying a 0.2% methane intensity standard to imports in select countries



*Included in this analysis (EU, China, India, Japan, UK, South Korea, Canada). Emissions reductions presented here are annual reductions, relative to a baseline year.

Spillover effects and cascading impacts

While policies aimed at regulating methane emissions from imported fuels can deliver significant direct reductions, their influence can also extend further by catalysing changes in exporting countries’ domestic practices. This is true to the extent that the share of exports subject to import rules constitutes a critical mass for the producing country and that investments for cleaner production are subject to economies of scale. Exporters that rely on access to regulated markets will have strong incentives to strengthen their methane controls, including improving leak detection and repair, phasing out routine flaring and venting, and investing in better measurement, reporting, and verification.

Fossil fuel trade is highly concentrated, with a small number of exporters and trade corridors representing the bulk of flows. As a result, changes in a handful of major trade routes could deliver significant emissions reductions. Notably, “dual-leverage

economies” like the United States, China, India, and Canada could play an especially important role. As both major fossil fuel producers and importers, their policies can shape methane standards on both sides of the trade relationship – at home and abroad.

Because of these potential spillover effects, the real-world impact of methane import standards could be much larger than the direct impacts quantified here.

To illustrate the potential for these spillover effects, the analysis takes a closer look at crude oil imports to the EU, UK, Japan, and South Korea. It finds that applying a 0.2% methane intensity standard to crude oil imports alone would reduce global emissions by an estimated 3.2 Mt CH₄ (about ¾ of the total across all fossil fuel products). To estimate domestic spillover, the analysis assumes that if combined crude oil imports to the EU, UK, Japan, and South Korea account for over 15% of an exporter’s total domestic production, that exporter adjusts its national standards in response. For those countries⁴, it further assumes that half of the remaining domestic crude oil not exported to these four markets also achieve compliance with the standard, while the other half stay at current methane intensity levels. Under these assumptions, the estimated spillover effect is 2.6 Mt CH₄, increasing the total annual reductions by 80% to 5.8 Mt CH₄.

This case study illustrates how methane import standards in strategic markets have the potential not only to regulate emissions from traded fuels, but also to drive extensive improvements within exporting countries – achieving far-reaching methane mitigation well beyond direct trade flows.

Raising global standards for methane reductions

Phasing out fossil fuels remains the cornerstone of the energy transition. Yet over the course of that transition, methane from remaining fossil fuel operations will continue to drive near-term warming. Addressing those emissions is one of the most effective ways to limit the magnitude and duration of overshoot.

Methane import standards offer a practical and powerful tool for doing precisely that. By tying market access to emissions performance, they can deliver measurable near-term reductions and raise the bar for global methane management.

⁴ Nigeria, Algeria, Libya, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, Angola, Kazakhstan, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia.

The EU's regulation sets an important precedent. If other major importers follow suit, these policies could close a meaningful share of the global methane gap while driving systemic improvements throughout fossil fuel supply chains.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that methane import standards can play a critical role alongside the global phase-out of fossil fuels, helping to cut emissions quickly and narrow the gap to Paris-compatible pathways.

For more information about the analysis, please refer to the [full technical report](#).