



Closing gaps on green house gas

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Bonneville Power Administration

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PORTLAND, Ore. –It is odorless, colorless and harmless to humans except for one glitch. It is a potent greenhouse gas.

It is SF₆ or sulfur hexafluoride gas. It is used by utilities to insulate high-voltage circuit breakers. Scientists say SF₆ traps heat in the atmosphere much like carbon dioxide. It is only 1 percent of greenhouse gas, but it can last 1,200 years. [The Environmental Protection Agency](#) says atmospheric concentration of SF₆ is increasing by 8 percent a year.

Today the Bonneville Power Administration joined with EPA and more than 30 other utilities and governments in a pledge to control SF₆.

"BPA has long sought to reduce SF₆ loss from equipment in service," Brunke says. "Leaks could cause that equipment to fail." BPA put stronger standards in place in 1996 when the greenhouse potential of SF₆ became known. BPA has about 250 tons of SF₆ in equipment located across the 300,000 square mile of its service territory.

Utilities aren't the only ones who use the gas. It also is used in air-soled sneakers, loudspeakers and to smelt magnesium – a lightweight metal used in aircraft.

"Our system is pretty tight," says BPA electrical engineer John Brunke. The American National Standards Institute says SF₆ leaks for new equipment should be less than 1 percent per year. BPA standards holds leak rates for new equipment to 0.5 percent. Actual levels for BPA equipment are much less. SF₆-containing equipment is controlled from the time it arrives, through any repairs and to disposal.

The EPA agreement calls for those signing to reduce leakage by replacing older, leaking equipment. EPA also calls on those signing to inventory SF₆ and emissions, establish procedures for handling the gas and set a goal for reducing emissions. Signers agree to fix leaking equipment more quickly.

Brunke says BPA when asked will work with other Northwest utilities to help them manage their SF₆-containing equipment.

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