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January 3, 2020

Mr. Darren W. Woods
Chairman and CEO
ExxonMobil
5959 Las Colinas Blvd
Irving, TX 75039-2298

Dear Mr. Woods,

I write regarding the February 2018 blowout at a natural gas well in Belmont County, Ohio owned by your subsidiary, XTO Energy. After the incident, XTO Energy initially said it could not determine the amount of gas that leaked from the well. Later, it issued an estimate that was around 400 percent lower than the actual amount of methane released. It defies belief that XTO Energy stated that it could not quickly determine the impact of the leak and then drastically underestimated the damage to the climate and environment caused by the well blowout. If this were an oil spill, Exxon and its subsidiaries would face financial and legal consequences. Just because a release of methane of this magnitude is not readily visible, that does not mean that it is less damaging to our climate and environment and should not be held to the same standard. However, current law does not appear to provide for the ability to issue civil penalties when oil and gas companies release massive quantities of methane from a well blowout. The American people deserve to know why this blowout happened, why your company significantly underestimated the severity of the blowout, and that there are procedures in place to ensure that these sorts of natural gas blowouts do not occur at other wells and that companies are held to account if they do.

In a study published on December 16, 2019, independent researchers used satellite data to determine that this one blowout led to the release of 60,000 tons of methane over a span of 20 days—more than the entire oil and gas industries of many countries release in an entire year, and far more than the 12,000 tons of methane initially reported by XTO Energy.^{1,2,3} Indeed, this

¹ Hiroko Tabuchi, *A Methane Leak, Seen from Space, Proves to be Far Larger Than Thought*, N.Y. Times (Dec. 16, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/16/climate/methane-leak-satellite.html>.

² Steven Mufson, *A blowout turned an Ohio natural gas well into a methane 'super-emitter'*, Washington Post (Dec 16, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/a-blowout-turned-an-ohio-gas-well-into-a-methane-super-emitter/2019/12/16/fcbdf622-1f9e-11ea-bed5-880264cc91a9_story.html.

³ Sudhanshu, *et al.*, *Satellite observations reveal extreme methane leakage from a natural gas well blowout*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (Dec. 16, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908712116>.

blowout may be the third largest methane release ever in the United States.⁴ The 60,000 tons of methane from this one blowout is equal to the global warming pollution emitted by more than 350,000 cars over one year.⁵

A methane release of this magnitude has a huge impact. We are currently struggling to address a growing climate crisis, and the release of 60,000 tons of methane has a massive climate footprint, as methane is around 80 times more potent a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide over a 20-year period.⁶ Not only is this contributing to a global climate emergency, but the release also posed an immediate threat to the local community. The blowout led to the evacuation of roughly 100 residents within a one-mile radius of the well site, with some residents unable to return to their homes for weeks.⁷ Additionally, neighboring communities were afflicted with health ailments including throat irritation, dizziness, and breathing problems.¹

Companies can be fined for offshore spills or for certain onshore spills under the Clean Water Act, but there is a regulatory blind spot regarding large methane blowouts from oil and gas drilling. This regulatory loophole undercuts any incentive there may be for companies to avoid methane releases or accurately report these leaks when they occur. Not only do we not know why this specific blowout happened—and why the well has already been placed back into service—but we do not know how many other blowouts may similarly be going underreported or unreported entirely in the oil and gas industry.

In light of the preceding, please respond to the following questions by January 15, 2020:

1. Why did XTO Energy initially say it could not estimate the amount of gas leaking from the well?
2. When did XTO Energy come up with the estimate of 12,000 tons of methane released, and how did it arrive at that calculation?
3. Please provide additional information on XTO Energy and Exxon's response to the initial blowout:
 - a. How long did it take XTO Energy to respond to the blowout?
 - b. Whom and which agencies did XTO Energy notify, once it was aware of the blowout, and when were these contacts made?
 - c. Why did it take 20 days to stop the methane blowout?
 - d. During the blowout, were hazardous pollutants other than methane released?
 - i. If so, in what quantities?

⁴ S. Conley, *et al.*, *Methane emissions from the 2015 Aliso Canyon blowout in Los Angeles, CA*. *Science* 351, 1317-1320 (2016).

⁵ Using EPA Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator (https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/energy/greenhouse-gases-equivalencies-calculator-calculations-and-references_.html) and IPCC 5 Global Warming Potentials (https://www.ghgprotocol.org/sites/default/files/ghgp/Global-Warming-Potential-Values%20%28Feb%2016%202016%29_1.pdf)

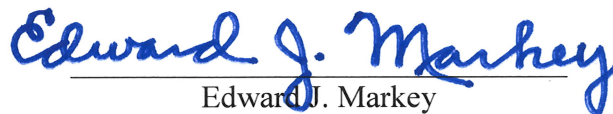
⁶ *Understanding Global Warming Potentials*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/understanding-global-warming-potentials>.

⁷ Paige Plefeger, *A fracking explosion in Ohio created one of worst methane leaks in history*, WOSU (Dec. 19, 2019), <https://radio.wosu.org/post/fracking-explosion-ohio-created-one-worst-methane-leaks-history#stream/0>

- ii. Are any of these pollutants listed as hazardous chemicals under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act or Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act or subject to the National Emissions Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants?
 - e. What steps has Exxon taken to measure health impacts on nearby residents and respond to them?
 - f. What steps were taken to ensure that the well would not experience another blowout after being returned to service?
 - g. What steps has ExxonMobil or its subsidiaries taken to ensure that no similar methane blowouts occur at other drilling sites?
 - h. How were any safety lessons from this blowout applied across the ExxonMobil natural gas portfolio?
4. How does ExxonMobil monitor its gas wells to make sure that no other major methane leaks are occurring undetected and that blowouts that release methane are properly accounted?
 5. How many methane releases of more than 1,000 tons have occurred at drilling sites of ExxonMobil or its subsidiaries over the previous 10 years? Please provide a list of each such instance, the date or dates the release occurred and how many tons of methane were released.
 6. Does ExxonMobil agree that oil and gas companies should be held financially liable, including through civil penalties, for the release of massive quantities of methane pollution? If not, why not?

We appreciate your prompt reply to these questions. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Georgia Lagoudas or Hannah Vogel on my staff at (202) 224-2742. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator