

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Keystone XL Pipeline: Why All the Fuss?

By: Paul Schwennesen - February 27, 2013

As the largest climate rally in history gathered to move "Forward on Climate" by protesting the Keystone XL pipeline, I can't help but wonder what the fuss is about. Robert Kennedy Jr. helpfully tells us that the pipeline is "threatening the future of civilization."

That would certainly explain it.

Let's see:

A. The pipeline's direct environmental impact appears to be relatively slight. Its route has been cleared with intense scrutiny from all levels of public oversight. The last hurdle was recently overcome by rerouting the pipeline to avoid the environmentally sensitive Sand Hills region of Nebraska -- a reroute that has recently been given the green light (so to speak) by Nebraska governor Dave Heineman. So unless the pipeline is somehow being routed over a previously unmentioned and unimaginably unstable geological formation (a North Dakotan Krakatoa?), I fail to see the threat to the future of our civilization. What am I missing?

B. The more diffuse, but apparently much larger environmental concern, is over the pipeline's potential contribution to global climate change. After his arrest in front of the White House on Wednesday, Robert Kennedy Jr. explains the now-prevalent narrative that the pipeline is going to influence climate change by increasing anthropogenic carbon emissions.

To get a better handle on this, I turned to my friend and colleague Chip Knappenberger, a climatologist from the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute. He recently penned an article describing his own investigations into the climate influence the Keystone XL pipeline.

Surprisingly enough, contrary to leading unswervingly to the end of civilization, Knappenberger's calculations show that the climate impact from the Keystone XL oil would be completely imperceptible.

When I asked him for specifics, this is what he told me:

"It is pretty straightforward to come up with a ballpark estimate as to the magnitude of the climate impact from using the 830,000 barrels of oil that could one day be carried on a daily basis through the Keystone XL pipeline. The answer, with regard to the change in the global average temperature, lies somewhere between 0.00001 and 0.0001 degrees of added warming

per year--an amount not only insignificant but essentially undetectable. In other words, there is no climate impact.

Keystone XL's oil will not lead to stronger hurricanes, more powerful winter storms, more intense droughts, flood, or heatwaves. It will not increase tornado outbreaks in the Southeast, crop failures in Midwest, or superstorms in the Northeast. It will not cause famines in Africa, floods in Bangladesh, or the submersion of Pacific islands. It will not lead to the death of coral reefs, the loss of rainforests, or the extinction of polar bears."

Hmmph. So much for Armageddon. This analysis seems entirely lucid and appropriate, which makes me wonder if the "Forward on Climate" protestors are producing more hot air than the pipeline!

Now to be fair, the counterargument might grant that the Keystone XL is not the elephant in the room it's made out to be, but represents the kind of cumulative fossil fuel addiction that must be slowed if we are to reduce anthropogenic emissions. And I concede the point: the Keystone XL is a symbol.

But is excoriation of symbols really all that meaningful in the larger context of planetary stewardship?

Technology breakthroughs have resulted in the world being awash in fossil fuels. The cat, in other words, is out of the bag. Whether or not the Keystone XL pipeline is built won't affect this situation one iota. We have discovered immense reserves of concentrated energy; reserves that promise to improve lives all over the globe. More children will eat, with more grandparents to watch them, living happier more fulfilling lives than ever before as a result of this glut of cheap, available fuel. And, inevitably, the use of this fuel will have consequences we should be aware of, managing them in a sane, sober fashion.

It seems to me that the protestors are coming about this issue from the wrong end of the oil supply and demand curve. With the supply side already more than ample and growing, Keystone XL's opponents ought to aim to reduce demand. How many of them are driving to the rally in an electric car? How many will get their like-minded friends to do the same? How many laptop users will be offering a solar charging station to their buddies? A vigorous campaign to live more efficiently, consuming conscientiously would spur the marketplace to greater efficiency, spark innovation, eliminate the need for a government subsidy of electric vehicles, and help to continue the decline in U.S. oil consumption that began about five years ago.

Another tack might be to support the development of new energy technologies to provide plentiful, safe, and reliable energy and which can outcompete fossil fuels in the free market. Success is gained and more widely supported by offering a better product, rather than urging the government to obstruct the production of an existing one.

Through such approaches, the Keystone XL pipeline could be transformed from a hollow symbol of climate change, to a potent symbol of grassroots action to find ways to achieve change without relying on government interference. That would be something worth rallying around.