



## **Paul C. Knappenberger: A slow death for the Keystone XL**

By Paul C. Knappenberger  
March 4, 2014

If recent reports are accurate, President Barack Obama will make a final decision on the beleaguered Keystone XL pipeline “in a couple of months,” but don't hold your breath. A recent ruling in a Nebraska court and a still-open public comment period at the State Department promise lengthy delays. The “couple of months” refrain has been used before. While the president could very well make a decision, he has no reason to, as he is setting the board in a way that he doesn't have to touch Keystone for the rest of his presidency.

While he hasn't moved to counter the bad publicity heaped on the pipeline, the president has cut the permitting time for natural gas export facilities. In this way, he is keeping both job creation proponents and environmental protectionists happy, allowing him to vacillate on Keystone without ever having to face the negatives that will come with any decision.

The president's strategic play – straight out of his Climate Action Plan – runs afoul of the science and economic benefits behind the pipeline, but is a winner when it comes to the politics.

The expansion of natural gas has a greater, more diverse and more widespread economic impact than Keystone XL. Estimates of permanent jobs once the pipeline is up and running are only in the low hundreds.

Expanding domestic natural gas production, on the other hand, is a boost to mining operators, transporters and refiners, and it supports a build-out of infrastructure along the way – with the money primarily changing hands in the United States. Speeding up natural gas permitting then is a perfect way to quiet the jobs lobby.

From an environmental standpoint, the preference for “clean” natural gas over so-called “dirty” oil from the Canadian tar sands fits perfectly with the president's continued push for measures to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. But since China annually increases its carbon dioxide emissions by many more times than we could ever hope to reduce ours, the math and science behind the president's efforts proves them to be ineffective. But this takes a backseat to the appearance of at least “doing something” about climate change.

On a recent trip to Indonesia, Secretary of State John Kerry called the dangers of a changing climate “perhaps the world's most fearsome weapon of mass destruction.” The president didn't waste much time in piling on, linking the risks of climate change to the pipeline during a visit to Mexico last week. Such talk is designed to appease green groups. Last week, these groups reiterated that presidential approval of the pipeline would be unforgivable and would result in a “vehement reaction.”

This rhetoric is way over the top. Increasingly, scientific findings are published that suggest that the Earth's climate is less sensitive to carbon dioxide emissions than is widely recognized, which means fewer, and less negative, impacts. When it comes to Keystone XL, the oil carried through the pipeline between now and the end of the century would add less than 0.001 degrees Celsius of extra global warming – which surely meets the president's definition of “negligible,” a criteria he has put forward for his approval of the pipeline. Furthermore, in its recently completed review, the State Department concluded that the overall environmental risk from the pipeline is low and manageable.

Unfortunately, when it comes to Keystone XL, facts don't seem to matter – what is dictating policy is environmental alarmism. That's why the pipeline's permitting process has been drawn out for more than five years and counting.

This all points to a slow, painful death for the Keystone XL pipeline – a death not at the hands of good science, but rather from political gamesmanship.

*Paul C. “Chip” Knappenberger is the assistant director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute.*