

The mindless studies of Keystone XL

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President Barack Obama has urged that we make this a “year of action,” and he is going to do his part by acting with vigor and dispatch to continue to study the proposed Keystone XL pipeline project.

The State Department just acted with an 11-volume, 7,000-page environmental review that concludes, like the several reviews prior to this point, that the pipeline poses no environmental hazard. You’ve got to hand it to the State Department — when it is determined to act, it moves.

White House chief of staff Denis McDonough went on “Meet the Press” to explain all the dizzying activity taking place as the U.S. government marshals its resources to see that Keystone is perpetually reviewed.

“We have one department with a study,” McDonough said. “Now we have other expert agencies, the EPA, and many others, who have an opportunity — the Energy Department, an opportunity to look at this and make their determinations.”

For its part, the State Department still needs to evaluate whether the pipeline serves the national interest, necessitating another period of intense action that will include asking “for the views of eight federal agencies identified in [Executive Order] 13337.”

Skeptics scoffed after the president’s State of the Union that he doesn’t have much of an agenda for his second term. They failed to appreciate how much of that second term will be devoted to studying what is already one of the most studied proposed infrastructure projects of all time. At this rate, there will be years of action on Keystone — with no one ever building anything.

Of course, that's the point. When there's no legitimate reason to stop a project that well-funded left-wing donors and a mini-grass-roots environmentalist army want stopped, the safest course is to make sure that it is always study-ready and never shovel-ready.

The Keystone project would add roughly 800 miles of pipeline in the U.S. and carry more than 800,000 barrels of oil a day to our refineries in the Gulf from the tar sands of Alberta. It has been under consideration for more than five years, even though Hillary Clinton said in 2010 that the State Department was "inclined" to approve it.

And why not? Already the State Department — involved because the pipeline crosses an international border — had issued a favorable draft environmental-impact statement. Paul Knappenberger of the Cato Institute notes that a similar pipeline project, the Alberta Clipper, won approval in two short years back in 2009 with glowing marks from State — it would "advance a number of strategic interests" and send "a positive economic signal."

Keystone XL was different; it became a hate symbol for the environmental left. In its fevered imagination, stopping the pipeline became a way to stop the development of the "dirty" tar sands of Canada and to slow climate change. As Brigham McCown, a former administrator of the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, puts it, opponents of the pipeline thought it was a Khyber Pass where a glorious stand could be made against Canadian oil.

This was always a childish fantasy. First, because the tar sands will get developed regardless, as the latest State Department environmental review attests, and more fundamentally, because the numbers don't add up.

Conservative writer Oren Cass makes the point that the United States accounts for less than six of the 35 gigatons of carbon emissions worldwide, and our emissions growth has been flat, while India and China have been growing at a double-digit rate. We could end all our emissions tomorrow and the rest of the globe would quickly make up the difference. The oil that would be transported by Keystone isn't a drop in the bucket; it's a drop in a vast ocean.

None of this matters, though, because railing against Keystone is such a potent organizing and fundraising tool for its opponents. President Obama is loath to cross them, and so will take swift and certain action — to keep examining the issue closely.