

Student's Name

Professor's Name

Course Name & Number

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### The Keystone Pipeline

The Keystone XL pipeline has been at the forefront of the U.S. environmental debate in recent months. Should the pipeline be approved by the U.S. government, it is to transport daily up to 900,000 barrels of tar sands oil from Alberta, Canada, all the way down to refineries in Texas and the Gulf Coast. Keystone supporters regard the pipeline as an opportunity to create more jobs and alleviate current energy crisis in the United States. The idea, however, is fiercely opposed by conservationists and climate change activists who claim that the environment may not be able to take another shot of pollution, leading to unpredictable consequences for future generations. Although analysts and policymakers on both sides of the debate come up with persuasive arguments and numbers to back their views, I tend to think that environmental concerns, indeed, should prevail over any economic rent that Keystone XL could possibly bring about.

No doubt, the pipeline could create more jobs for Americans and help President Obama improve dire job markets in this crisis time. According to some estimates, Keystone XL will potentially create 20,000 new jobs for Americans. It may sound like a big number; however, in a country with 12.7 million people without a job, it may not make much of a difference. The project also does not seem to offer permanent employment, as many people, upon completion of the construction, will have to quit and look for jobs elsewhere. In oil-related projects like Keystone XL, labor conditions may put additional pressure on workers' health, as many of them

will have to work in extreme temperatures and inhale contaminated air. In such a case, the benefits of new jobs creation may not quite outweigh the costs.

The recent increase in prices of crude oil and gasoline as a result of unease in the Middle East has prompted many American families to “tighten up their belts” and fear about the environmental future of their country even more. Keystone XL, in this regard, is presented as an attempt to secure almost unlimited oil supplies from a neighboring and friendly Canada, and thus relieve the mounting energy crisis. As it turns out, most of the fuel will not even reach the car tanks of Americans. The plan is to process the sands oil from the Keystone pipeline into diesel fuel and other products and then export them to Europe and Latin America. The exports will bring fresh dollars to the United States’ economy, yet they will not solve the problem with the crisis. Whereas the Keystone oil may give certain stimulus to the U.S. economy in general, it is unlikely to produce the decrease in prices or better availability of oil products for domestic population.

As a result of stiff opposition from environmentalists, the question of Keystone XL has taken up a noticeable political flavor. Several prominent names in the academia have been speaking against the Republican-orchestrated Keystone project. For example, NASA’s James Hansen, in his repeated note to the President, asserted, “We are researchers at work on the science of climate change and allied fields. Last summer, we called on President Obama to block the proposed Keystone XL pipeline from Canada's tar sands. We were gratified to see that he did so, and since some in Congress are seeking to revive this plan, we wanted to restate the case against it”. Many other top academicians in the U.S. have also joined the cause in resisting the pipeline development. Why would researchers oppose the idea so ardently, though they, like other people, drive cars and are interested in a secure energetic future for America?

Already mentioned James Hansen has said that burning all the crude in the tar sands would be “game over” for the climate. Although a part of the extraction process takes place in Canada, its effects – reinforced by exhausts from domestic refineries – will surely hit hard on the U.S. ecology. Burning oil in the amounts as conceived by the Keystone supply plan (i.e., 900,000 barrels a day) is likely to cause a huge upsurge in greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, further aggravating the situation with the climate change. Although some opponents may say that such an increase in GHG emissions will be marginal for the overall picture, the first symptoms of the looming climate change are registered regardless. Hence, any further rise in the fraction of GHGs in the atmosphere may accumulate into a critical mass and cause irreversible consequences for the global climate.

Another counterargument is the high probability of spills on the pipeline. TransCanada predicted that Keystone would see app. 1 spill in 7 years; however, only in the past year, there have already been 12 spills. These statistics show just how dangerous this project is for the environment and that we do not have the promised control over the pipeline. We all remember what happened in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico. The oil spill then killed countless animals, fish, and birds, leaving a permanent scar on the local wildlife and communities. It would thus be unwise not to learn those lessons and end up with a similar disaster in the future.

On balance, it is easy to play with numbers and speculate that the Keystone pipeline is laden with positive economic benefits for American people. The economic wins may prove rather marginal compared to the immense environmental harm that these extra barrels of Canadian tar sands oil may cause to our own health and that of future generations. Prominent researchers almost unanimously converge on the unpleasant consequences that the greenhouse gases from burning the Keystone oil will bring for the global climate. We shall hope that the

lessons learned from the previous oil-related disasters and the already painful climate change symptoms will make the Keystone XL project remain on paper.