

The Keystone XL Debate: Complex and Consequential

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ENVS 301: Environmental Case Studies



ABSTRACT

The Keystone XL Pipeline is an addition to the existing Keystone Pipeline meant to shorten the distance extracted bitumen would have to travel to be processed. Major disagreements have arisen over the past decade over the impacts the pipeline would have on the environment, jobs, and local and native populations in the area of construction. There are many groups and corporate interests making competing claims, so it is difficult to decipher what is true from false, especially when cleverly masking or omitting negative environmental impacts from analyses.

The decision of whether to permit the pipeline flip-flopped over the course of three administrations. This case study will show how the decision of whether to permit construction of the pipeline became entangled in political, economic, and climate debates. The case shows how infrastructure projects can become a focal point of climate change debates and how corporate interests and grassroots advocacy interact.

BACKGROUND



Figure 1: A massive tar sands oil pit. Tar sands are then trucked to facilities which separate the bitumen, a thick molasses-like substance made of hydrocarbons. Environmentalists oppose the KXL because of how dirty a source tar sands are for oil. Source: USCUSA



Figure 2: A map of the proposed Keystone XL, putting the Nebraska Sandhills and Ogallala Aquifer, an ecologically sensitive area, at risk. Source: Washington Post



Figure 3: There has been significant opposition from U.S. indigenous people as well as First Nations people in Canada. They claim the US government hasn't consulted them on the pipeline even though its proximal to some sacred lands including burial grounds. First Nations people cite local health and environmental hazards, including cancer clusters and damage to wildlife. Source: GRIST

- The State Department has permitting authority for the project because it crosses an international border.
- The State Department conducts Environmental Impact Assessments and receives comments from other agencies and the public.

DETAILS & DATA

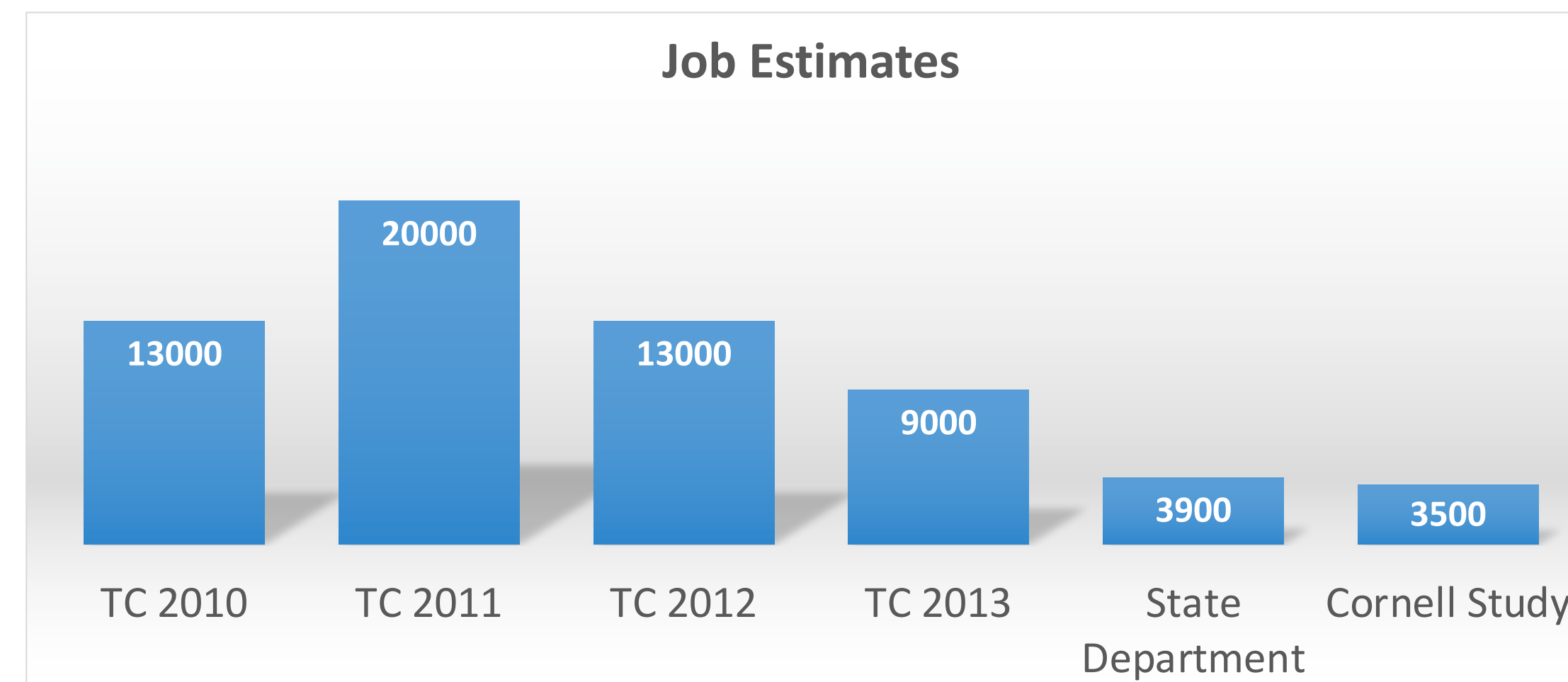
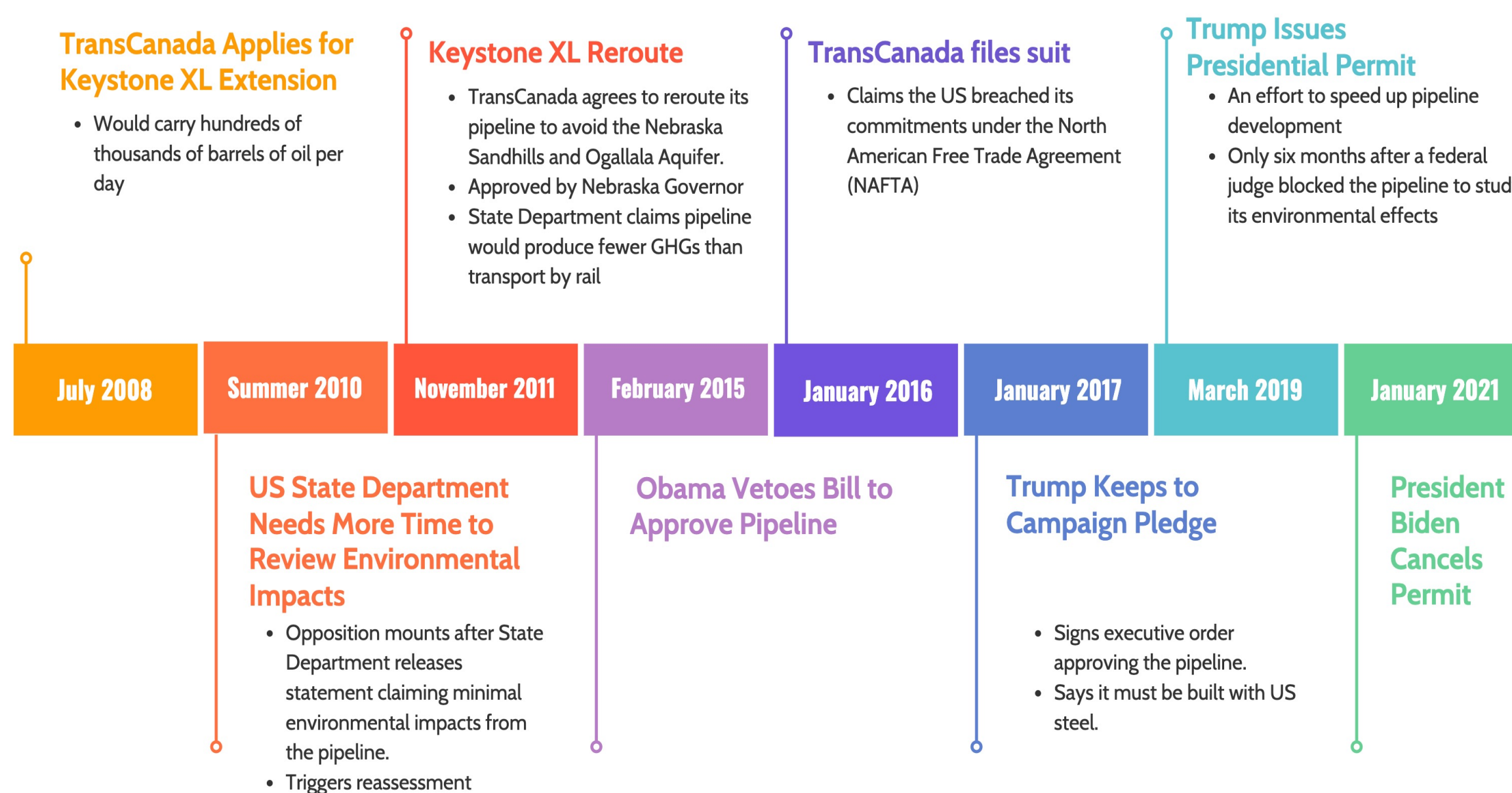


Figure 4: This details the competing claims of how many jobs would be produced in construction and maintenance of the KXL. The pipeline's economic impact is a major consideration in deciding to approve or deny the pipeline's permit, so it's important that competing claims are resolved or understood. Sources: Forbes and CNN

- Local Environmental Impacts
 - Excavation of the tar sands in Alberta would lead to further deforestation of Canada's boreal forests.
 - Pipeline construction encroaches on Native American sacred burial grounds.
- Chance of Pipeline Spillage
 - Over 30 in the Keystone Pipeline's first year of operation. A University of Nebraska study found that the pipeline could expect 91 major spills in its 50 year lifespan.
 - Spills can result in damage to water resources like the Ogallala Aquifer, which supplies water for irrigation to much of the Midwest.
- Impact on Climate Change
 - Tar sands emit 17% more carbon than other types of crude.
 - Massive fossil fuel investments undermine efforts to minimize global warming by transitioning to renewables.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS



STAKEHOLDERS: Approve

- TransCanada
- Canadian Government
- Trump Administration
- Nebraska Governor

STAKEHOLDERS: Cancel

- Native Americans
- First Nations People
- Obama Administration
- Biden Administration
- Environmentalists

ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- Proponents see the pipeline as a potential means to increase jobs, to solidify a relationship with a close ally, to reduce dependence on foreign oil, and a move that will not significantly increase the US's greenhouse gas contribution significantly.
- Opponents see the pipeline as a potential environmental hazard to those up and down the pipeline, especially those 2 million people who rely on the Ogallala aquifer for drinking water. They also see the development of the pipeline as a step backward in the US's progress to being climate-conscious, as the pipeline would commit the US to using hazardous tar sands for years to come. They also dispute the number of jobs claimed by the pipeline's supporters, instead suggesting it would add far fewer.
- The debate over the Keystone XL Pipeline is incredibly complex with many intersecting factors such as economic impacts, local and global environmental impacts, politicking, and the effects on indigenous communities.

TEACHING THE CASE STUDY

PRE-CLASS:

READ: Part A of my case study and one article from each stakeholder on one side of the issue.



WRITE: Answer Qs. Summarize supporting information from assigned side.

IN CLASS:

MEET: Talk with someone of similar side



RESEARCH: Do final research to craft policy arguments

DEBATE: Each side assembles and begins debate.



WRITE: Everyone writes down their honest point of view and whether they were convinced by the other side.

SOURCES

- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/business/keystone-xl-map/>
- <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/what-are-tar-sands>
- <https://grist.org/climate-energy/cowboys-and-indians-stage-a-feisty-keystone-xl-protest/>
- <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/timeline-keystone-xl-pipeline-1.5877117>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/energysource/2013/05/10/pipe-dreams-how-many-jobs-will-be-created-by-keystone-xl/?sh=18a8026a5bb1>
- <https://money.cnn.com/2014/11/18/news/economy/keystone-jobs/index.html>
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