

11-8-2015

Bruce Huber was a Guest on NPR's The Weekend show, "Environmentalists Celebrate Keystone XL Decision"

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Recommended Citation

Huber, Bruce R., "Bruce Huber was a Guest on NPR's The Weekend show, "Environmentalists Celebrate Keystone XL Decision"" (2015). *NDLS in the News*. Paper 321.

http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndls_news/321

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BUSINESS

< Environmentalists Celebrate Keystone XL Decision

Updated November 16, 2015 · 12:10 PM ET

Published November 8, 2015 · 7:53 AM ET

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

President Obama's decision to reject the Keystone XL pipeline was met with breathless excitement by many in the environmental community.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED ACTIVISTS: (Chanting) Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you, Mr. President.

MARTIN: During the seven-year fight over Keystone, activists were arrested and chained themselves to the White House fence. After Friday's announcement, they were celebrating in front of it. Others are taking the victory with a grain of salt, as NPR's Nathan Rott reports.

NATHAN ROTT, BYLINE: Let me introduce you to Bruce Huber. He's an associate professor of law at Notre Dame. And he's about to dump a bucket of cold water on some of the excitement you just heard about the Keystone XL decision.

BRUCE HUBER: In the grand scheme of debates about U.S. energy policy, climate policy, this is just not that big of a deal.

ROTT: The Keystone XL pipeline, Huber says, became an outsized symbol in the larger fight over climate change, a physical, tangible thing that people could rally

against. And in terms of that, he says Obama's decision was significant. In terms of actual impact though, not so much. Huber gives two reasons for that. First...

HUBER: There are numerous other pipelines that are underway - that are being debated - that simply haven't received the same kind of attention.

ROTT: And there are numerous other pipelines that have already been built. Just ask John Stoody, a spokesman for the Association of Oil Pipelines.

JOHN STOODY: In the time that President Obama has been considering the Keystone XL pipeline, pipeline operators have built the equivalent of 12 Keystone pipelines across the country.

ROTT: By that, Stoody means that thousands of miles of pipelines have been built in the same time that people have debated the 875-mile stretch that would have completed the Keystone XL. And more are being built right now. The other reason, Huber says, that the Keystone announcement isn't as big as people are making it out to be...

HUBER: It's not as though the rejection of this pipeline is going to effectively keep tar sands oil in the ground.

ROTT: Canadian oil companies are still going to pump it. They're still going to refine it. And they're still going to transport it. Here's Skip York, vice president of integrated energy at Wood Mackenzie, an energy research and consulting firm.

SKIP YORK: They're going to move this oil one way or the other. They're just going to look for the most cost-effective way to do it. But they will move the oil.

ROTT: And, York adds, those more cost-effective ways of moving that oil - by freight, truck and barge instead of pipeline - won't help the already horrible carbon emissions associated with tar sands.

YORK: If anything, it makes the emissions profile worse.

ROTT: Michael Brune, the executive director of the Sierra Club, says he's heard both of those arguments before, and he's got his disagreements with both. Yes, he says, the U.S. is building more pipelines. But...

MICHAEL BRUNE: This is the first time we took one on.

ROTT: And they won. What's more, Brune says, is that the low price of oil and the relatively higher price of moving it without a pipeline is cost prohibitive. So the idea that this move is purely symbolic...

BRUNE: This is both substantive and symbolic. It's substantive because this would have allowed for significant expansion of one of the most carbon-intensive fuel sources on the planet.

ROTT: It's symbolic, he says, because...

BRUNE: It became a litmus test for how serious our country is on climate change.

ROTT: And with the world set to meet about climate change in Paris in just a few weeks, showing just how serious the U.S. is about addressing climate change, even through symbolic gestures, could lead to far more substantive results down the road.

Nathan Rott, NPR News.

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