

December 14, 2015

## Is the ExxonMobil Research Investigation the Next Keystone Pipeline?

When issues become symbolic in a public policy debate, they take unexpected and unpredictable paths. This was true of the Keystone Pipeline debate and the same will be true for the latest controversy over ExxonMobil's climate change research.

In February 2013, actress Daryl Hannah was arrested outside of the White House as part of a protest against the Keystone Pipeline. Later that year, billionaire Tom Steyer started NextGen Climate, a political fund focused on stopping Keystone. These developments were indicative of the escalation that surrounded the usually bureaucratic and boring process of permitting a pipeline. Keystone became a symbol of climate activism, a litmus test for political leaders on their commitment to fighting against the use of fossil fuels. After more than five years of debate, President Obama disapproved the permit for Keystone earlier this month.

Now, the spotlight has shifted. The new symbol in this debate has become ExxonMobil and its research on climate change back in the 1970s. Over the past several weeks, there have been calls for the Securities and Exchange Commission to investigate whether the company misled its investors. Members of Congress have sent letters to the Department of Justice asking for an inquiry of whether ExxonMobil committed fraud. The New York Attorney General has subpoenaed extensive financial records, emails and other documents. Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley have all spoken up in support of investigating the company.

When an issue becomes symbolic the way Keystone permitting did and the way that ExxonMobil research seems to be, it is nearly impossible to predict where the debate will end up.

Permitting a pipeline is rarely—ever?—a national issue. Few energy observers would have predicted the tortured path of the Keystone permitting when the process started in 2008. Similarly, as we start to see the ExxonMobil issue unfold, it is difficult to see where this might lead.

Some have compared this to the suppressed research of the tobacco companies, but the research done by ExxonMobil is a bit more complicated. Smoking cigarettes is the act of an individual and the negative health effects impact that individual directly and nearly immediately.

While fossil fuels do contribute in a significant way to climate change, the impacts of specific actions—or a specific company—are much harder to pinpoint. The time frames are much longer too. And research on global systems involves dozens of factors.

All of this is not to say that ExxonMobil is faultless in this situation. The evidence certainly indicates that—best case—ExxonMobil tried to shade the facts on the information that it had. ExxonMobil certainly did not publicly embrace the conclusions of its own scientists.

So, where does this lead?

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Given its newly found status as a climate symbol, the investigation into ExxonMobil has already become a national issue and may very well grow to be the focal point of climate activists across the country for years to come.

When an issue becomes a symbol, the usual rules of engagement don't apply. And the ultimate impact on ExxonMobil—and indeed on other energy companies—could be wide-ranging and dramatic.

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