

Balancing Environmental Protection and National Infrastructure Development

The Hoover dam, completed in 1936, serves as a great example of an infrastructure project of national importance with the dual benefits of improving the economy and the environment simultaneously. Projects like that portray America's passion to innovate and build, and the benefits of long-term strategic thinking.

In recent years, government's focus has shifted away from infrastructure development in favor of environmental protection. Both are vitally important to sustainable economic growth and improving the quality of life for all Americans. Over the past 8 years, the Obama Administration has taken numerous actions to protect the environment and effectuate a shift away from fossil fuels through a laundry list of regulations, including the Clean Power Plan, moving to lower EPA's Ozone requirements, placing new mercury restrictions on power plants, and charging forward on Renewable Fuel Standards.

Some of these policies and proposed policies will benefit public health, but in large part much of the balance between sustainable infrastructure development and environmental protection has been lost. The costs of losing balance can be high for the environment and the public. For example, projects that increase energy production from hydropower (like the Hoover Dam) reduce pollution, but one can question if a project of that scale would be permitted under the current regulatory framework, given the tight restrictions and long and arduous approval process.

Similarly, autonomous vehicles will reduce emissions in the transportation sector, but they may not function properly and safely on damaged

infrastructure, because they cannot be programmed to account for a random pothole in the middle of the highway. However, building and modernizing highways has become very difficult to do.

An average highway project in America can take from anywhere between 10 – 15 years to complete, primarily due to delays caused by extensive environmental review processes.¹ When arguing the need for change in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), a law initially established in 1970, Rep. John Duncan (R-TN) observed that domestic projects take almost double or triple the time it takes to gain approval abroad.² Expanding further on the issue, the CEO of Transportation Corridor Agencies commented that it took the company 12 years to complete 51 miles of a 67 mile road, but 15 years to just garner approval for the last 16 miles.³

The Keystone XL pipeline permitting process serves as another example of how a myopic focus on environmental issues can affect a project of national importance, even when the project itself provides for increased environmental protection. The Keystone XL permit application, thought to be a simple cross-border permit at the time, was filed in 2008.⁴ However, the project generated strong opposition from some environmental advocacy groups, which politicized an otherwise run of the mill infrastructure project and ultimately led to its demise. Lost in the discussion was the fact that the new pipeline would have been built to state of the art standards and displaced hazardous material shipments from other less safe means of transport, increasing environmental safety.

¹ Snyder, Tanya. (2011). Are Environmental Reviews to Blame for Infrastructure Project Delays? Retrieved from <http://usa.streetsblog.org/2011/02/15/are-environmental-reviews-to-blame-for-infrastructure-project-delays/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Wall Street Journal. 2014. The Keystone XL Pipeline Timeline. Retrieved from, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/04/24/the-keystone-xl-pipeline-timeline/>

The U.S. should continue on the path to being the world's leader in environmental protection and sustainable development. Forward thinking policies should consider the long-term economic and environmental impacts, rather than short-term ideological ones. Finding the proper balance means looking at policies through a lens that recognizes cutting corners in the short-term will have negative impacts on the environment and the economy in the long-term, and that newer, better, safer infrastructure projects will benefit the economy immediately and provide a healthier environment in the short and long-terms.

Protecting the environment and improving national infrastructure are not inconsistent goals, and in the long run, improving the infrastructure network is one of the most efficient ways to protect the environment. On the other hand, a strong and modern infrastructure network is the very life-blood of economic growth, and turning a blind eye to policies which hinder infrastructure modernization could have irreversible consequences. The World Economic Forum ranks America 25th in the world for infrastructure quality, behind countries such as the UAE, Oman, South Korea and Saudi Arabia.⁵ As we saw in Flint, Michigan, neglecting infrastructure puts public health and the environment at greater risk than modernizing it.

The Alliance for Innovation and Infrastructure (Aii) consists of two non-profit organizations, The National Infrastructure Safety Foundation (NISF) a 501(c)(4), and the Public Institute for Facility Safety (PIFS) a 501(c)(3). The Foundation and the Institute focus on non-partisan policy issues and are governed by separate volunteer boards working in conjunction with the Alliance's own volunteer Advisory Council.

⁵ Kawa, Lucas. 2013. American Infrastructure Ranks 25th in the World. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-infrastructure-behind-developed-world-2013-1>