Environmental politics is so much hot air I sometimes don't know which way to whirl.

Take the Keystone XL pipeline project, which is designed to link the oil-thirsty United States to the tar sandstone of Alberta. It's been under environmental review since September 2008 when TransCanada applied for a permit from the U.S. State Department. Yet after four phases, 14 proposed routes, two major studies by the State Department, cartloads of Environmental Protection Agency advice and more than 200,000 public comments, President Barack Obama put the project on hold last November, ostensibly pending additional analysis.

Proponents claim the project is desperately needed to create construction jobs, tax revenues, energy independence from suspect allies and to reboot the U.S. economy via lower oil prices. They claim it will be more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly than tanker transport. Opponents draw an ideological line in the sand and ask U.S. culture to enter rehab for its addiction to petroleum. Their main concern is global climate change.

It involves the Sand Hills region of western Nebraska: a billowing patch of prairie, an important wetland habitat for wildlife and a recharge zone for the underlying Ogallala aquifer, the region's primary source of water. Will pipeline construction destabilize the soil causing wind erosion? Will the pipeline rupture -- perhaps across some undiscovered seismic fault -- polluting wetlands and aquifers?

During his last presidential campaign, Obama promised that his would be "the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil." Four years later, 12,000 anti-Keystone demonstrators held him to that promise by surrounding the White House. Four days later, Obama delayed a decision until at least 2013.

The tit for tat puffs of hot air have been fascinating. On July 6, 2010, Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., the chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee called Keystone XL "a multi-billion dollar investment to expand our reliance on the dirtiest source of transportation fuel currently available." The next day, the Wall Street Journal opined that "U.S. greens loathe oil, and the tar sands has become the next Alaska in green mythology."

The Sand Hills are the largest patch of desert dunes in North America, "resembling those found in the hyper-arid parts of southern California and the Middle East," but "now covered with vegetation, which in some years makes" the region "resemble Ireland," according to geologists David Loope and James Swineheart. A "sobering example of climate change," because compelling evidence proves that multiple droughts within the last thousand years have "led to full mobilization of the sand sea."

In the Sand Hills, drifting sand blocks streams, ponding what summer rain arrives from the Gulf of Mexico in hollows created by wind erosion between the dunes. In response, the wetlands stabilize the dunes by raising the humidity high enough to keep the grass alive, which prevents the dunes from drifting. Meanwhile, the ponds leak downward to recharge the aquifer, which has risen dramatically where sand drifting has been significant.

An argument could be made that burning tar sands is good for the region because it will warm the globe, which will increase drought in western Nebraska, killing the grass, which will mobilize the dunes again to make even more wetlands.
Things, however, are fine right now. The last thing we need is a veritable Sahara in the middle of our continent. So let's do what we can to keep future drought from pulling the hair trigger on dune mobilization. And one of the most important symbolic decisions we could make is to deny the Keystone permit. Yes, the liquefied tar will likely go elsewhere, likely in tankers, which is worse.

But at least we will have done the right thing for our grandchildren.