

In his much-anticipated speech on climate policy, President Obama made an important statement about the approval process for the controversial Keystone XL pipeline project. He said that the project should not be approved if it would “significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution.” One question that this raises is whether the same standard would be any less applicable to other project approvals at the federal level. How about drilling leases? New coal mining operations? How about new or expanded highway projects? The list goes on.

But the ultimate question, of course, is: how much of a net change in greenhouse gases is enough to be declared significant? For several years now, California has included greenhouse gas considerations in its environmental review of new projects. Setting a level of significance that would trigger full environmental review and mitigation requirements has always been controversial. In these times when carbon reduction is the critical objective, there is a strong argument that any net increase in emissions resulting from a project should be considered unacceptable. It will be interesting to see if this is the standard that the federal government will apply to the approval of Keystone XL and other federal actions.