

Can cowboy diplomats build new bridge to China?

By Todd Wilkinson

Jackson Hole News & Guide

Grant Larson sets a brisk pace at the front of our pack.

The 73-year-old politically-conservative president of the Wyoming Senate, who is in China as a U.S. citizen rather than acting in any official state capacity, leads a delegation from the Jackson Hole Center For Global Affairs up steep steps toward the summit of Beijing's ancient Drum Tower. The official enduring name of the monolith, its origin dating back to 1272 and the reign of Kublai Khan, is the Tower of Realizing Shamefulness.

For centuries, it was utilized by various ruling dynastic emperors to stroke the official time in a watchless world.

Today, drummers gather ceremoniously every half hour. This tourist slog may be relatively short, but its no less formidable in grade than the slope of Snow King Mountain back home. Reaching the top, the surprisingly nimble, white-haired Larson is left breathless, not only from the commanding vista, but the hazy air, muting the view in all directions, is opaque, chock full of industrial pollutants from Beijing's growing auto society and Dickensian factories.

Only 25 percent of Chinese families in Beijing own cars but the ranks of motorists, who are giving up bicycles for the car, could easily double over the next decade. And it will set the new standard for gridlock.

In just two years, however, the world spotlight will be on China's capital as the most populous country on Earth hosts the summer Olympic games.

In order to comply with pollution standards mandated by the Olympic committee, the government is planning to impose strict restrictions on car travel and order factories to be shut down weeks in advance to clear out the air.

China is booming, churning forward faster than any other modern economy. As one prominent local citizen says, "the country is one big construction site." That's no exaggeration.

The speed of growth has not come without profound, mind-boggling costs. There are widespread shortages of water. The aqua that is available is too sullied for human consumption.

But the most obvious trapping, one that leaves a hacking cough in the back of the throat, is pollution.

Health care costs and lost worker productivity associated with bad air in this nation of 1.3 billion gnaws away at 15 percent of China's GDP annually. That figure, too, is growing. What does it

matter to Americans, Westerners, Wyomingites, and indeed to inhabitants of seemingly insulated Jackson Hole how breathable the air is on the other side of the world?

As David Wendt, who oversees the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs says, "where climate change is concerned, China's destiny is our own." Inexorably.

A thousand miles west of boom-boom Beijing and Shanghai in the Shanxi province, Wyoming and Montana share with this region of China a kindred blessing: Coal. Lots of it. A mother lode of carbon that, despite what some environmentalists hope, is not going to sit latent in the ground.

More than 75 percent of China's energy needs are met by burning coal and turning it into electricity. In the next few years, more than 500 coal-fired power-generating plants are scheduled to come on line. In addition, Shanxi province has over 400 coke smelters, ranging in size from mom and pop operations to Pittsburgh-esque kilns.

All of the plants and kilns, largely unfitted with any pollution control technology, belch tons of mercury, lead, and carbon-dioxide plumes into the sky, casting a perpetual gloom of smog over China that literally blocks out the sun.

Not to diminish the oil and gas discharges of the Jonah Field, Pinedale Anticline and other locales, but the pollution of Shanxi puts the haze drifting over the Wind River Mountains into sharp perspective.

Larson is not known as an environmentalist nor does he discount the concerns over air quality expressed by his Wyoming constituents, but he says China's challenges are so monumental they deserve attention. Both regions can learn from one another and set a new international standard.

Allow me here to admit one thing: I was initially skeptical. I was incredulous that a fairly obscure outfit like the Jackson Hole Center could play any significant role in a globally daunting issue like energy development or that the partnership being solidified between Wyoming and Shanxi could produce any tangible dividends.

But I now believe I was wrong.

Sharing Larson's perspective is Jackson Hole native son John F. Turner, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state in the Bush Administration, current board member of Peabody Coal and a man with extensive diplomatic experience abroad; Rob Wallace, also a born and bred Wyomingite, former political staffer for U.S. Sen. Malcolm Wallop and who today is a senior executive with General Electric; and Judd Swift, current assistant secretary in the U.S. Energy Department who quietly, behind the scenes, has been trying to advance a strategy involving governments and private business for carbon sequestration [i.e. keeping carbon dioxide earthbound instead of having it escape into the atmosphere where it hastens climate change].

There are others I will also mention. For the moment, consider this: It's a remarkable thing, really, to hear a former senior official in the U.S. state department and one of the senior

lawmakers in the Wyoming legislature talking openly about climate change being both real and a serious threat to the environmental future of the planet.

At the same time, it is equally poignant to note that their colleagues in China also show no reservation in accepting that the human causes of climate change need to be confronted. The question is how?

They and others were present in the Shanxi city of Taiyuan attending the U.S.-China Clean Coal Forum along with their Chinese counterparts. Emerging from the talks is an unprecedented memorandum of understanding that establishes a foundation for clean coal technology possibly coming to both the American West and China.

Can their strategy succeed? With the Vice President of the United States owning a home in Jackson Hole's Teton Pines neighborhood, anything is possible.

Next week: How this group of unlikely cowboy diplomats may play a role in saving the world.