

Jackson is finding role on world stage

By Todd Wilkinson

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This week I am venturing into the bottleneck of civilization.

Along with a group of prominent Jacksonites, including Grant Larson, John Turner and David Wendt, president of the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, I am going to China to be a fly on the wall.

Our gathering, part of the China Clean Coal Forum, also includes representatives of General Electric, Asian-American Coal Inc., and the Big Sky Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership as well as their Chinese counterparts.

Here's the question they're discussing: How to raise the standard of living in the most populous nation on earth, using the fuels of the Industrial Age but simultaneously trying not to destroy any hope of addressing carbon dioxide outputs that are accelerating climate change?

Although this is hardly a diplomatic mission for members of the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, and certainly Grant Larson is not officially representing the Wyoming State Senate, nor is John Turner, now retired from his post with the U.S. State Department, acting in any official capacity on behalf of the Bush Administration (It's a shame he isn't).

But the meetings are momentous, nonetheless, says David Wendt. It's rather amazing that they are even taking place, bringing together academics, energy experts, and civil servants to advance a goodwill dialogue pertaining to the two largest coal producing regions in each country.

No reasonable, rational discussion about climate change and cutting carbon emissions can occur without contemplating what role coal is going to play in the economic development of China and the western U.S.

"Coal obviously is a workhorse here in the United States and a workhorse in China because of its ability to produce power," Turner said when he was still serving as assistant secretary of state for Oceans and Environmental and Scientific Affairs under Colin Powell.

"Climate change poses a global problem that will require a global response," he added. "The United States and China share a common responsibility in this regard."

There's good reason why John Turner was regarded during his tenure as the most progressive, creative, conservation-minded member of the Bush Administration. As a wildlife biologist with a background in science, he also is no drag the foot denialist about the root cause of global warming.

The looming challenge is answering whether it's possible for anything truly substantive to be done in the coming decades, and how to position coal as a transition fuel that can be exploited yet allow human-generated carbon releases to be reduced.

Moreover, can meaningful strides be made through the free-market or will it require swift government intervention, the kind that, so far at least, the Bush Administration has been reluctant to consider?

Susan Capalbo, principal investigator for the Big Sky Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership which is examining such possibilities as injecting carbon produced from coal smokestacks back into the ground, is at the top of the agenda for the governors of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and the Dakotas where there are huge economic, environmental and, in the future, regulatory implications.

Following the lead of landmark legislation signed into law last month by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to dial back carbon emissions and establish a carbon-trading program, the northern Rockies could be the next frontier for innovation. Moreover, it could serve as a model for similar strategies to be adopted in China.

"The experiences that we will see in terms of a much more active global trading market for carbon will have to come in response to more government mandated programs," Capalbo says.

It may seem strange that one of the catalysts for these discussions happens to be the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs that itself was the brainchild of a former Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce director, a local economist, a couple of international, conservation-oriented business people, and some local, home-grown daydreaming of how to effect positive change in the world.

Yes, for those cynics out there who saw the Chamber's Power of Place campaign as little more than a bunch of feel-good froth, a tangible outgrowth has been these evolving discussions between Wyomingites and residents of Shanxi Province China which one day could become the underpinnings for revolutionary international policies.

Every climate change expert points out that any hope of curbing carbon emissions resides in the two nations—China and India—that are undergoing profound economic transformation riding on the backs of the fossil fuel age.

Unless technological breakthroughs are introduced and employed there to manage carbon, any action taken in the rest of the world will be rendered moot.

"Cleaner energy is not just a Shanxi problem, it is not just a Wyoming problem, it is a world problem," notes Grant Larson, who has been the majority floor leader of the Wyoming Senate. Where will his insight lead? Let's hope it gains traction in Cheyenne.