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From Cherry Blossoms To Climate: EPA As Peace Corps For Environment?

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Views on climate change can turn on a single incident; former White House regulatory review chief and deregulatory advocate Jim Tozzi says his position changed after the National Cherry Blossom festival.

“The whole land over the blossoms was mud,” he says, because of climate change-induced Tidal Basin flooding damaging the ground around the blossoming trees. While some squelching mud underfoot might seem a minor annoyance, it got Tozzi thinking about the broader impacts of increasing temperatures and the knock-on adverse effects such as rising sea levels (or in this case, rising tidal waters in Washington, DC).

But, and this is a direct quote, Tozzi believes EPA “doesn’t have a rat’s chance in hell” of dealing with climate change under the Trump administration -- not just because of the president’s opposition to greenhouse gas rules, but also because of what he sees as the current limitations of the Clean Air Act in dealing with global warming, and a need to ramp up lobbying of other countries to win commitments for reducing emissions.

His solution? Send EPA overseas.

“Authorize EPA to send staff teams to other countries and be lobbyists” for other countries to pursue climate policies, he told me. “An Environmental Peace Corps.”

And this coming from someone who for decades has advocated more-limited government both in his lengthy service at the White House Office of Management & Budget’s regulatory review division, and in private practice leading his Center for Regulatory Effectiveness (CRE), where he advocates for things like Data Quality Act challenges and against overly stringent rules.

Tozzi’s not the kind of person who would usually find much common ground on environmental policy with the likes of Gov. Jay Inslee (D-WA), but the idea is compatible with the Democratic presidential candidate’s recent call for a “Climate Conservation Corps.”

“When people hear Tozzi’s saying this about climate change, that’s the end of my career and CRE,” he jokes with a roaring laugh. But he’s serious about what he sees as a pressing need to take unprecedented steps to use EPA’s strengths to tackle the issue.

He says a model could be how the State Department sends officers overseas for bilateral and multilateral talks, except this would be a dedicated team of EPA experts focused on climate change. As Tozzi explains in [a recent blog post on the CRE’s website](#), “A key obstacle to addressing climate change is the compliance cost associated with the resultant program. In particular it is very difficult to convince one nation to employ a climate change program if other nations who are often its international competitors do not make a similar commitment” -- but a climate corps dispatched by EPA could get other countries to act.

Armed with the backing of the agency and the tools of social media, this Environmental Peace Corps would “maximize EPA’s leverage” in getting other nations on board with steps to reduce greenhouse gases. That could include technology sharing, voluntary agreements, and other measures both within other countries’ borders and

across several nations. A future administration should encourage this team of staffers to work with foreign leaders to craft novel approaches to targeting climate change, Tozzi argues.

The more mundane EPA work -- things like approving Clean Air Act state implementation plans, issuing Clean Water Act permits -- is all “minor” stuff compared to the urgent and significant need to address climate change, he says.

To fund the overseas expeditions, he suggests shifting funds from other EPA programs by focusing the agency’s domestic work on that which is mandated by statute. “Compare the payoff to issuing permits to climate change,” Tozzi suggests rhetorically, arguing that the urgency in dealing with the latter justifies paring back EPA’s work on the former. This would free up agency dollars to pay for the international work.

“Let the staff talk,” he says, “Get them using social media and talking with India, with China, to enlighten them to really take up this issue.”

How does that match up with Inslee’s idea? The governor, one of many Democratic candidates for the 2020 presidential race, [recently wrote a blog post](#) for *Data For Progress* pitching a Climate Conservation Corps to “help mobilize the American people to rise to the defining challenge of our time: defeating climate change.”

Inslee proposes that his Climate Corps would have three elements; a National Climate Service Corps giving young Americans the chance to work on sustainability with projects like installing solar panels on rooftops in their own communities, a Global Climate Service Corps to tour overseas and learn from other countries about their climate mitigation and resilience efforts, and a Green Careers Network to “build on national service to focus on the challenge of permanent job creation in a clean energy economy.”

Of those ideas the Global Climate Service perhaps comes closest to what Tozzi is suggesting – though it’s more of an educational program. His idea for EPA instead is to mobilize the agency’s staff of technical and policy experts and dispatch them around the world to lobby and work with other countries on tackling climate change.

Of course, for that to happen it would require an administration with an agenda of affirmative climate policies, and Tozzi concedes that’s not going to happen under Trump. So at least next year, he’ll be getting his shoes muddy again if he heads to the cherry blossoms.

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