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Can a crowdsourced mega-forest offset Trump's climate chaos?

It's an appealing idea, a vast forest to soak up the extra carbon released due to Trump's policies, but it may not be so easy in reality, says Olive Heffernan



One down, only 10999999999 to go
manop1984/Getty

By **Olive Heffernan**

Since taking up residence in the White House in January, President Donald Trump has made good on his promise to put a wrecking ball through environmental protections.

Notably, the billionaire businessman has signed an executive order to rescind the Clean Power Plan, a policy that would drastically cut emissions from US coal-burning power plants, and has pulled the US out of the Paris Agreement that aims to keep planetary warming below 2°C.

The Trump administration has taken many other small steps – approving the Keystone XL pipeline and rolling back restrictions on vehicle exhaust emissions, for example – that together damage aspirations of the US entering a post-carbon era soon.

Even without his interventions, we are on course [for the world to be more than 3°C warmer by the end of this century](#). So it's hard not to feel despondent at this systematic dismantling of environmental policy. But news this week suggests a more productive response.

[The BBC](#), and other outlets, report that a global tree-planting project – aimed at countering the president's environmental impact – is now gaining momentum, with more than 250,000 trees already pledged.

Kentucky-size forest

The brainchild of Dan Price, Jeff Willis, and Adrien Taylor – a scientist, a PhD candidate and a [sustainable hat maker](#) – “[Trump Forest](#)” aims to soak up the extra carbon emissions that would be released as a result of Trump axing the Clean Power Plan. That's a tall order – fully implemented, the Clean Power Plan would stop 650 million tonnes of carbon dioxide

being released over the next 8 years.

The trio kick-started the idea from New Zealand by donating 1000 native trees from Taylor's company, Offcut; the project now has supporters from locations as diverse as the US, Malawi and Japan. Price has said that [more than 110 billion](#) trees would be needed to negate the additional carbon the president threatens to unleash.

If it reaches its goal, Trump Forest would cover an area of 100,000 square kilometres – roughly the size of the US state of Kentucky.

In practice, the forest won't be just in one place, but planted piecemeal in many regions, through the efforts of its supporters. So far, these number hundreds of individuals, each of whom has either financed forest restoration projects in places such as Madagascar, Haiti, Ethiopia and Nepal, or has planted a tree themselves and notified the campaigners.

While perhaps the most obvious challenge is the scale of ambition, Trump Forest will also face issues common to all carbon offsetting schemes. One is verifying that any trees planted are above and beyond those that would have been grown without the project; another is ensuring trees are placed where they do more good than harm. Planting in Earth's snowy northern reaches, for example, can darken the land surface, [only serving to hasten warming](#). [Tropical forests offer more cooling potential](#) than non-tropical ones.

Other downsides are possible. New plantations can deplete water supplies to other areas, reduce soil nutrients and create a monoculture if a few fast-growing species are favoured over a good mix of native ones. And when trees die and rot or burn, they rerelease their carbon, so the fix could turn out to be relatively short-term unless planting is maintained to counter this.

Regardless of whether Trump Forest reaches 110 billion trees, its message has instant appeal – that despair is a dangerous response to ignorance. We're much better off sowing the seeds of change than sitting complacently until the US reinstates a leader who is actually willing to listen to science.