

'Green collar' jobs seen as prosperous

By 2030, nearly a half-million new jobs could be created in green industries

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When 1,800 workers lost their jobs after a Maytag appliance factory and headquarters closed last year in the small town of Newton, Iowa, a wind turbine blade company saw opportunity — an available, skilled workforce in the middle of one of America's hardest wind energy production regions.

TPI Composites Inc. is building a new plant there as the energy industry aims for a cleaner, more sustainable future. With proper incentives, thousands of "green-collar jobs" could be created, from ethanol production to wind turbines and solar panels, and all the maintenance and construction to support them, industry officials said.

TPI used to build boats, but switched to turbines in 2001 for the "major growth opportunity," said Steve Lockard, CEO of the Phoenix, Ariz.-based company. The idea, he said, is to "transform the workforce away from the Maytag-type jobs of the past into jobs that can withstand the test of time going forward."

However, advocates and executives say training is key to making sure the industry has enough skilled workers to make it into a real economic engine, and are pushing for more lucrative tax breaks, much like oil companies already receive, to make it profitable.

With the economy sputtering, even presidential candidates are getting on board. Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both say they would funnel federal money into job-training programs for workers to become skilled in green industries, among other initiatives.

The Republican candidates, too, all have plans they say will stimulate the clean energy sector, but none have specifically addressed workforce training for sustainable energy industries.

For people like Robert Hughes, who worked at Maytag for 21 years, none of it really matters. He's been out of work since October. At 55, he was making \$22 an hour on the assembly line, and worries that new industries replacing the old manufacturing jobs simply means he will become a relic as they look for younger workers.

TPI promised to create 500 jobs within three years at a base pay of \$12.25 an hour, not bad for new workers, but quite a cut for Hughes, who says he might apply for work there anyway.

"I'm encouraging my grandkids to go to college and further their education and get into something other than manufacturing because it doesn't really hold a promising future," he said.

Overall, however, the unions see "an opportunity to restore some of the 3 million jobs in manufacturing we've lost in the last seven years," said Bob Baugh, executive director of the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Council.

But while wind and solar have been seeing steady increases in production and investment, federal tax breaks set to expire at the end of the year and an anticipated shortage of skilled workers could stall future growth, experts say.

"Already companies that have invested millions of dollars in this industry are getting nervous," said Randall Swisher, executive director of the American Wind Energy Association.

An energy bill President Bush signed last year left out tax breaks for clean energy industries. The White House said it needs to focus on programs that expire this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. The bill does authorize \$125 million for green-collar job training programs, but the industry says that isn't enough.

The tax credits also are not part of a House passed economic stimulus package endorsed by the White House, although the Senate has included the extensions in its version of the bill expected to come up for a vote next week.

Without prompt action, renewable industry experts say next year's market growth likely won't look so good. According to the wind association, when previous tax credits expired in 2004, the amount of wind capacity installed fell by 77 percent.

The federal government must not only extend the tax credits, but provide more money for training workers, said George Sterzinger, executive director of the Washington-based Renewable Energy Policy Project.

If not, manufacturing will go overseas and the jobs will be lost, he said. It makes no sense, he added, to wean America off its dependence on foreign oil only to become dependent on other countries for products in sustainable energy production.

"You look at a wind turbine. It's got a whole bunch of parts. Somebody makes the blades, somebody makes the tower, somebody makes the gear boxes, the electronic controls," Sterzinger said. "Those parts can come from China,

India — or from Buffalo."

The wind energy industry currently employs about 45,000 people in the U.S. and had \$9 billion worth of investment last year, a 45 percent increase from 2006, Swisher said.

"Given that growth, we're already seeing constraints in terms of workers," he said.

Swisher estimates that by 2030, nearly a half-million new jobs could be created in the wind industry, in manufacturing, construction and operation.

The solar industry, too, is growing. Last year set a record with 314 megawatts of new solar capacity installed in the U.S., said Rhone Resch, president of the Solar Energy Industries Association. That's enough to power about 80,000 homes, he said.

The market was worth just about \$200 million five years ago. Last year, it topped \$2 billion, Resch said.

"These are jobs that are really the backbone of the economy, jobs like roofers, carpenters, electricians and plumbers," he said. "But the federal government is completely asleep at the switch here."

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