

Unemployed Seek Training for 'Green Collar' Jobs

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SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) -- As the economy sheds jobs, community colleges across the country are reporting a surge of unemployed workers enrolling in courses that offer training for "green-collar" jobs.

Students are learning how to install solar panels, repair [wind turbines](#), produce [biofuels](#) and do other work related to renewable energy.

"I think the opportunities in this field are going to be huge," said Rudy Gastelo, a part-time handyman who left the construction industry two years ago. "I'm not getting that 9-to-5 paycheck, so I'm looking forward to maybe getting a job within a solar company."

To meet growing demand, two-year colleges are launching or expanding green job training with money from the federal [stimulus package](#).

Students and schools are betting that President [Barack Obama's](#) campaign to promote alternative energy and curb [global warming](#) will create millions of well-paying green jobs that do not require a four-year degree.

Gastelo, 32, is learning how to install [solar power](#) systems at San Jose City College, which has long waiting lists for such classes.

But the steep economic downturn has not spared the green energy industry, which had been expanding rapidly before the financial crisis. Many renewable-power firms are now canceling projects, laying off workers or selling themselves to competitors because business has dried up.

"It's going to be a very tough year. A lot of companies are not going to make it," said Ron Pernick, co-founder of the market research firm Clean Edge Inc.

Many newly trained workers are having trouble finding jobs, and some people worry that schools could end up producing too many workers for too few jobs.

"Even in these areas with great potential, the number of actual positions is way down from where they could be," said Barry Sedlick, who chairs the California Green Collar

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Jobs Council.

But many college officials believe there will be strong demand for green-collar workers once the economy rebounds and governments move to limit greenhouse gas emissions and require more alternative energy.

The federal stimulus package sets aside tens of billions of dollars to promote renewable energy and energy efficiency. It will also create thousands of jobs retrofitting government buildings and public housing to make them more energy-efficient.

"The recovery package will help move industry forward and offer a lot of opportunities for workers at all levels," said Mindy Feldbaum, director of workforce development programs at the National Institute for Work and Learning.

The renewable energy industry generated about 500,000 jobs and \$43 billion revenue in the U.S. in 2007. The much broader energy-efficiency industry generated 8.6 million jobs and \$1 trillion in revenue, according to a report issued in January by the American Solar Energy Society.

The study projected that the two sectors could employ 16 million to 37 million people by 2030, depending on government policy.

In Florida, Palm Beach Community College expects to enroll 200 students this fall -- up from 20 students last fall and 150 students this spring -- in a new associate degree program that focuses on alternative energy sources such as wind, solar or [hydroelectric](#) power.

Associate Dean Sam Freas is optimistic about green energy's long-term prospects, but he is careful to set realistic expectations among students.

"They look at me and say, 'Can you guarantee me a job?'" he said. "And the answer is, 'Absolutely not.'"

In North Carolina, Central Carolina Community College has long waiting lists for green building and renewable energy classes. The school recently created an associate degree for sustainable fuel production.

"The perception is that there is just a ton of these green jobs already out there," said Andrew McMahan, who coordinates the biofuels program. "The reality is that they are coming, but like any other industry it needs time to mature."

In Michigan, which has the nation's highest unemployment rate at 12 percent, Lansing Community College has seen enrollment in its alternative energy degree program grow from 42 students in 2005 to 252 students in 2008. This fall, the college will begin offering certificates for solar, [geothermal](#), wind turbine and energy efficiency technicians.

Most new students are middle-aged men who recently lost jobs in the auto industry, which makes them eligible for a state program that provides \$10,000 to unemployed workers for training.

"They see the field of alternative energy as the industry that's going to pick up where the automotive industry left off," said David Wilson, who coordinates the alternative energy program.

In Silicon Valley, community colleges have teamed up with the solar energy industry to train workers how to install rooftop systems. When the program was launched in 2007, solar power was growing rapidly in California, thanks in part to a \$3 billion state rebate program.

But the financial crisis has frozen the market for new systems. Many solar-installation firms are laying off workers, not hiring them.

Matthew Welch, who teaches the Solar 102 class at San Jose City College, recently lost his job as a solar installer. Now he is starting his own solar company and may try to hire some of his students.

"The cost is going to be coming down," Welch said. "You're going to be seeing solar everywhere in the future."

Associated Press Writer Christine Armario in Tampa, Fla., contributed to this report.

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