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Creation of Green Jobs Is Worthy but Elusive Goal

Tacking too many goals onto green investment may undermine effectiveness



Growing demand for solar systems, such as this one at the Department of Water and Power in Los Angeles, will require more installers.

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Staff Writer

Washington — Among labor and environmental activists who gathered at the February “Good Jobs, Green Jobs” conference in Washington, a sense of excitement was palpable.

For years, they had been promoting the creation of “green collar” jobs — jobs that are related to energy-efficient systems and development of alternative forms of energy — as a worthy goal, one that would help restore U.S. manufacturing leadership, reduce U.S. dependence on oil imports and address global warming. Now, there was talk about a “New Green Deal,” an allusion to economic and social policies promoted by President Franklin Roosevelt to address the Great Depression of the 1930s.

According to Apollo Alliance, an advocacy group and conference co-organizer, close to \$115 billion for energy-efficiency, renewable-energy and mass transit projects in the 2009 economic stimulus bill comes close to such a deal. The money will help create or retain hundreds of thousands of “green jobs” over the next two years, according to activists and government officials.

However, some people look at the term with skepticism. Robert Pollin, a professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, said the term “green jobs” is more confusing than helpful.

Green investment, the term Pollin prefers, will create jobs across *all* sectors, he told *America.gov*. The new positions will include construction workers retrofitting buildings, lawyers structuring renewable-energy contracts, researchers working on clean-energy technologies and delivery people who bring food for workers at construction sites.

Matthew Kahn, a professor of economics at the Institute of the Environment at the University of California in Los Angeles, said the wholesale description of jobs as being green also muddles important distinctions — for example, between employment in the private and public sectors and between skilled and entry-level jobs.

CAN GREEN JOBS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

In the Los Angeles area, it is becoming easier to have a solar panel put up on a house.

Some former prison inmates, many of whom were gang members, have found they can make a living installing such panels. Supported through Homeboy Industries, a nonprofit that helps ex-convicts find employment, they take a course at a public vocational school and apply for jobs paying \$15 an hour.

The program fits what some advocacy groups want the green stimulus to achieve. Green for All and Apollo Alliance promote green investments as a way to help reduce poverty, rebuild depressed communities and achieve other social-justice goals. “Entry-level jobs for which unskilled workers would qualify,” said Kate Gordon, a co-director of Apollo Alliance, “need to be career-track jobs, not dead-end jobs.”

Pollin said combining poverty reduction with clean-energy projects that rely on entry-level jobs such as retrofitting buildings may work. But connections between the green investment and social goals become more tenuous as projects become more sophisticated.

Furthermore, according to Kahn, as goals are added to the green



Workers install a pipe in a geothermal water well at Raser Technologies' Thermo

investment, the focus inevitably shifts from the environmental objectives.

Power Plant in Utah.

He has doubts about even those objectives. Kahn said most economists would prefer to have a direct incentive for tackling climate change, such as a mechanism to set a price for carbon dioxide emissions, and a separate policy to boost the declining labor market. But he said combining these two goals may be a matter of political expediency.

DO GREEN JOBS GROW ON TREES?

Nobody knows exactly how many so-called green jobs already exist, and estimates of how many more can be created from new public and private investments range from 1.8 million to 5 million over the next 10 years.

Kahn said it is difficult to forecast job numbers.

"Boosters of such [clean-energy] programs have an incentive to overstate these figures" as they try to secure more funding for their pet projects, he said.

Even enthusiasts of the clean-energy drive, such as Joel Makower, a clean-energy business specialist, are concerned that the green stimulus will be seen as a "greenwash," referring to a whitewash as a metaphor for covering the truth, if its potential for job creation is overhyped.




Pollin, using data from the Labor Department, concludes that an investment in energy-efficiency measures and clean-energy production would create three times more jobs than would a similar investment in existing fossil-fuel sectors, mostly because clean-energy projects are more labor-intensive and cannot be easily outsourced overseas.

Kahn believes the number and kinds of jobs that can be created will depend on how the programs are executed and whether they are free from political influences. "Governments around the world do not have a good historical record in picking winners," he said.

But defenders of the stimulus argue that the private sector, not the government, will be making choices as the funding mostly comes in the form of matching grants and loan guarantees for private investors.

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