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The Bulletin

Downturn hasn't put damper on green jobs in Central Oregon

A boom is expected in the near future, and not just in fields that you'd expect

By Kate Ramsayer / *The Bulletin*

Published: July 27, 2009 4:00AM PST

There's only so many windy patches of Earth — and even fewer patches close to transmission lines.

So for the next five to 10 years, the wind power industry is going to be running full steam ahead, said Mike Costanti, principal with Western Community Energy.

"This industry is growing very quickly — and we feel our company will grow quickly as well," Costanti said.

He anticipates quadrupling the size of his Bend-based company's development staff over the next couple of years, with jobs for turbine operators, lawyers, permit writers, electrical engineers, structural engineers, construction workers and more.

"We have a lot of room for growth," Costanti said.

A study released last month by the Oregon Employment Department found that Oregon had more than 51,000 "green jobs" in 2008. Even with the economic downturn, environmentally friendly jobs were projected to increase about 14 percent by 2010. And in Central Oregon, green employers predict that the area could need people working in a variety of jobs that require a range of skills — from energy auditors to organic farmers to solar electricians.

Wind

There are six different stages to develop a wind farm, Costanti said. And each stage needs people with a different skill set.

"You'll have the lawyers who need to put the contracts together," he starts off.

Green Jobs

The number of green jobs in the state will grow about 14 percent between 2008 and 2010, according to a study by the Oregon Employment Department.

Occupational Group	Total Workers 2008	Projected Workers 2010	Change	Percent Change
Farming, fishing and forestry	5,858	7,960	2,122	36%
Transportation and material moving	5,255	7,025	1,770	34%
Production	6,512	7,625	1,113	17%
Architecture and engineering	4,360	5,283	923	21%
Construction and extraction	10,381	11,077	696	7%
Protective services	1,032	1,543	511	50%
Life, physical and social science	4,135	4,338	203	5%
Installation, maintenance and repair	2,233	2,492	259	12%
Education, training and library	790	892	102	13%
Management	3,639	3,791	152	4%
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	2,877	3,026	149	5%
Business and financial operations	663	797	134	20%
Community and social services	157	263	106	68%
Computer and mathematical	244	301	57	23%
Health care practitioners and technical	165	178	13	8%
Personal care and service	29	27	-2	-7%
Food preparation and serving related	513	514	1	0%
Legal	81	81	0	0%
Arts, design, entertainment, sports and media	460	465	5	1%
Office and administrative support	1,570	1,376	-194	-12%
Sales and related	2,437	1,927	-510	-21%
Total	51,402	58,811	7,409	14%

Source: Oregon Employment Department Workforce & Economic Research

Andrea Rosenberg | The Bulletin

What is a green job?

The Oregon Employment Department defines it as one that:

- Increases energy efficiency, like an insulation installer.
- Produces renewable energy, like a geothermal driller.
- Prevents, reduces or mitigates environmental degradation, like an organic farmer or recycling center operator.
- Cleans up and restores the natural environment, like a hazardous waste cleanup worker.
- Provides education, consulting, policy promotion, accreditation, trading and offsets, like an energy auditor or policy analyst.

And then permitting specialists to get the necessary OKs, he said. Wind businesses could also use engineers, financing specialists, construction workers and turbine operators.

Western Community Energy currently has seven people in its development department, Costanti said, and he could see that number increasing to 30 over the next several years. And there's plenty of potential employees to choose from — the company gets about 20 résumés per week.

"It's lit a fire under us to get to work and get as many people to work as we can," he said.

And once it gets going, wind can create secondary jobs as well — for people who sell goods or provide services to the industry.

"The people who made money in the gold rush in California and Alaska weren't the gold miners," he said. "It was the people who were selling the shovels."

Solar

PV Powered, a Bend solar equipment manufacturer, has hired 10 to 12 people in the past several months, and could add another 40 or so employees by late 2010 as the solar market grows, said Erick Petersen, vice president of sales and marketing with the company.

"We'd love in 10 years to have PV Powered the largest employer in Bend," he said, though "it could take awhile."

The company needs engineers and technology professionals, he said, as well as people familiar with the manufacturing business and how to find ways to build things efficiently and without waste. There's some overlap with the high-tech industry as well, he said.

But applicants need more than a necessary skill set, he said. People need to have a passion for the field, he said, and a desire to help build the industry.

"We see lots of smart, well-paid, talented people sending us résumés, but it takes a little more than that," Petersen said. "You've got to see renewable energy as more than your next great job opportunity."

Many appear to be seeing the opportunities in installing solar panels, however, said Mike Hewitt, the owner and president of E2 Powered, a Bend solar contractor.

"Every single program that offers any kind of training in solar, it seems like it's just swamped," he said.

It takes a lot of work before people can climb up on a roof and hook up solar panels — people have to earn an electrical or solar license, and spend a minimum of 4,000 hours training on the job.

"You can't hire somebody who may have technical skills off the street," Hewitt said.

GreenSavers, a Bend company that conducts energy surveys of buildings to diagnose areas where energy is wasted, is planning to hire a person with energy auditing certification from the Building Performance Institute, said Kendra Van Note of Green- Savers.

But that person will have even more training from the Oregon Department of Energy and the Energy Trust of Oregon.

"It's a pretty intensive program, and they need to be able to complete a certain number of hours in the field as well," Van Note said.

The energy auditing field will keep growing, she said — but only if customers continue to keep energy efficiency in mind.

"We just don't want it to be some trend," Van Note said. "It's really important that customers are educated about what they can do to make their homes more energy efficient, and that they're requesting these types of services. Then, the industry will be sustainable."

Water and soil

Green jobs aren't just in the renewable energy and energy- efficiency fields — people can have environmentally friendly jobs in watershed or ecosystem management as well, working on efforts to restore damaged environments.

There's an increasing need for ecosystem management, said Ryan Houston, the executive director of the Upper Deschutes Watershed Council. And funding for projects is on the rise, even if it doesn't always match the need, he said.

"We really have seen an uptick in the last couple of years, and where that goes in the future is hard to see," he said.

People interested in watershed management need to have skills in a range of areas, Houston said — from biology and hydrology, to land use planning and economics.

"We look for people who really have the ability to be literate in a variety of disciplines," he said.

For example, the watershed council is working on a project to restore Whychus Creek as it flows through Sisters — and for that, employees need to understand flooding and erosion aspects, as well as how the state manages floodplains, private property rights and city planning regulations.

"Those folks who are most creative about crossing disciplines are the ones who are going to lead us out of these real tough challenges," Houston said.

When it comes to green jobs, one growing field, literally, is sustainable agriculture and organic farms.

"Local food is becoming incredibly popular all over the world as a sustainable pursuit," said Gigi Meyer, owner of Windflower Farm in Bend.

Meyer grows vegetables, herbs, flowers and fruits on a 10-acre farm, and has a waiting list for her weekly Community Supported Agriculture food baskets.

Because organic farmers can't simply spray chemicals, weeding and other tasks make an organic operation a labor-intensive one, she said. And part of organic farming is not only to respect the land, she said, but to respect employees — she pays her farm crew of four more than minimum wage.

"Given that I grow on such a small area, it actually employs a lot of people," she said.

And more small, sustainable farms could be on the way in the area, she said, whether it's vegetable farms or sustainable dairies.

"There's just so many opportunities that people are just beginning to explore in what our area can support in terms of agriculture," she said.

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Published Daily in Bend Oregon by Western Communications, Inc. © 2008

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