

The Wrong Debate on Green Jobs

3p By [3p Guest Author](#) | October 13th, 2010

by Andrew Winston

In the heated debates about climate change and the clean tech economy, it's hard to avoid a discussion about whether green jobs are "real" or if they can replace traditional fossil-fuel jobs. On one side, think tanks like Center for American Progress issue [reports on the potential for creating millions of new jobs](#) as we build the clean economy. With a different perspective, the forces aligned against climate action often create [a false trade-off between economy and environment](#). They make the argument that doing anything to tackle climate change, like putting a price on carbon, will destroy oil, gas, and coal jobs in particular. But this debate is moot on two counts.

First, we're not facing a choice between the growth of old economy jobs and the expansion of new energy jobs, but between decline and prosperity. One global economy, the clean one, is growing, and the global battle for the new jobs is on. Some countries – such as China, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and many others – are going after these jobs aggressively. The other part of the economy – the dead fuel economy – is not going to be a growth engine (with the important exception of natural gas, which may provide a useful, medium-term bridge to the future). Oil is basically at peak production globally, and coal plants are nearly impossible to build in the U.S. anymore. Even as the world demands more energy, and even as fossil fuel production continues, these companies will continue to get more efficient with labor. So don't count on the fossil guys to create new wealth and jobs.

So the choice is between a growing industry and a flat or shrinking one. That means it doesn't really matter if the growth area is growing fast enough to "replace" the old one or not – we have to go after that growth no matter how big it is.

But, second, and more importantly, we've been talking about the new economy jobs entirely the wrong way. Admit it, what do you picture when you hear the phrase "green jobs"? Mainly solar installers and wind turbine mechanics, right? In a recent, [skeptical Newsweek article](#), the author laments that "green-tech workers – people who do things like design and build wind turbines or solar panels – now make up only 0.6 percent of the American workforce." When described this way, pursuing green jobs doesn't seem like much of an economic growth plan.

Those clearly defined green jobs do lie at the core of this new world, and they are in fact growing fast, sometimes literally replacing what came before. A famous GM auto plant will soon be

[pumping out electric Teslas](#), for example. And remember how sustainable building materials company Serious Materials took over a Kensington Windows plant that was closing and [re-hired the laid off employees](#) – this was one of the few bright spot stories from deep within the recession.

But there are more subtle shifts in labor going on as companies that did one thing in the old economy are finding their skills useful in the new one. Another company, [Global Marine Energy](#), has been installing and maintaining undersea cables for over 150 years. After serving the telecom and oil & gas industries for decades, it's now also stringing cable to offshore wind farms all over Europe.

Or consider a former Maytag manufacturing facility in Newton, Iowa that [now produces wind towers](#). This wind tower manufacturer, Dallas-based [Trinity Industries](#), represents the less-discussed, real green jobs story. A company that has made rail cars and barges since the 1930s, Trinity is finding new markets. Imagine standing an empty rail car on its end, and you can see how Trinity was able to apply its skills. I heard about Trinity from Howard Gould and David Smith, two investors with a hedge fund dedicated to what they call “the clean infrastructure space.”

As Gould says, “everyone is still stuck in the idea that the clean economy is wind and solar.” He describes the supporting structure of industries, the “picks and shovels” that will underpin this new gold rush. A lot of it is not sexy, but it's real and it's often inherently local. “The guy driving the truck hauling equipment to make oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico,” Gould says, “could easily haul stuff to a wind farm.”

All these kinds of infrastructure jobs are not included in most green jobs discussions, but they're very real. And they'll certainly account for more than 0.6 percent.

Then there are the jobs we don't have exact definitions for yet, or that we can't fully imagine. Chelsea Sexton, an electric vehicle advocate and consultant, talks about what we'll need to support millions of electric car owners. Mechanics will develop new skills of course, but we'll need new service and support teams to help people get used to a new business model (that is, paying their utility for their car fuel). And as Sexton says, we'll develop “a new industry to accept used vehicle batteries and sort them according to chemistry, condition, and future use...there are all sorts of possibilities in green jobs that we just haven't thought through.”

A new green economy is just that...a whole new economy, with job openings at all skill levels, from truck drivers to inventors of new battery chemistries. The solar or wind installer is just the tip of a very large iceberg that's coming our way. Will we let it pass by or take our piece?

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