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Saving energy and growing jobs

Green Jobs – Thousands more Oregonians expected to work in ‘green’ industries – including the retrofitting of homes

BY DON MCINTOSH

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With elected leaders at every level of government promoting “green jobs” as an economic savior, out-of-work Portlanders might want to know where to find those jobs.

Oregon had 51,402 “green jobs” in 2008, according to a survey released June 29 by the state Employment Department – a number projected to grow 14 percent by 2010.

The survey defined a green job as one that promotes or produces energy efficiency or renewable energy, or prevents or cleans up environmental degradation. Mostly, green jobs are old jobs, repurposed. Computer chip makers make solar cells. Loggers remove brush to prevent forest fires. And building contractors become “home performance contractors” – retrofitting houses to make them more energy efficient.

Home energy efficiency is a growth industry, with solid employment prospects, says Energy Trust of Oregon operations director Steve Lacey. It means employment for HVAC specialists, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and laborers – installing high-efficiency furnaces, better water heaters and heat pumps, lighting systems, solar panels, and high-efficiency windows.

The sector with most jobs growth potential, and the biggest bang for the consumer’s buck, is insulation. That’s because bland “weatherization” is getting a re-brand as a major frontline in the battle against global warming. Buildings account for two-fifths of greenhouse gas emissions, mostly because of the energy it takes to heat and cool them. Weatherization – sealing ducts, caulking holes, and insulating floors, walls and ceilings – can cut home energy use by 30 percent.

“Even before the recession hit,” Lacey said, “we identified a change in perception over the past year and a half: People are now not just concerned about energy efficiency, but about climate change. People are looking at their carbon footprint.”

Federal grants ramp up projects

Energy Trust, a publicly chartered agency funded by a charge on gas and electric bills, offers homeowners free home-energy reviews and cash rebates for energy-efficiency improvements. Lacey said more homes are getting energy retrofits during the recession than ever before: Rebate checks and home energy reviews have soared 50 to 75 percent this year from 2008.

And city, state and federal programs are looking to shift the industry into high gear.

The federally funded, county-administered “low income weatherization” program just got a big budget increase thanks to the federal stimulus program: On June 8, Oregon’s low-income weatherization program got a \$15 million grant, with \$22.5 million more on the way. For homeowners who qualify, the program pays for up to \$6,500 for energy-efficiency improvements.

And work started July 10 on the first of 30 homes to get a retrofit this summer under a city of Portland pilot program known as Clean Energy Works Portland. The program, funded by a \$2.5 million federal



JONATHAN HOUSE / PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP
Ted Snider of EcoTech LLC blows insulation into the attic of a Southeast Portland home.

stimulus grant, will expand to 500 homes by next April. The way it works, homeowners borrow money from a revolving fund at below-market interest and repay it, over 20 years, on their utility bills. They also get an “energy advocate” – a sort of retrofitting case worker – to help them manage the contractors. The pilot project is projected to employ 55 people over the next nine months.

They’ll earn at least \$15.12 an hour, thanks to the “wage floor” provision of a just-passed state law authored by southeast Portland state Rep. Jules Bailey. The new law will use \$10 million in lottery and bond funds to seed projects like Portland’s in jurisdictions around the state. Bailey predicts the statewide pilot projects will employ 1,500 people in the next 18 months. Beaverton, Gresham and Clackamas and Multnomah counties have expressed interest.

There’s plenty of room for growth. In Multnomah County, an estimated 100,000 houses are good candidates for energy retrofits. John Gardner, work force manager at Worksystems Inc., says if home energy-efficiency efforts scale up enough, Multnomah County alone could account for 2,000 to 3,000 jobs during the next five years.

Insulation projects are saving jobs

Growth in the energy efficiency business is cushioning the downturn for building contractors, says Bob Boryska, manager at JB Insulation of Sherwood.

“Thank goodness for weatherization,” Boryska said, “or we would have had to lay off even more.”

With about 50 employees, JB Insulation is about half the size it was two years ago at the height of the building boom.

The real estate bust may actually be contributing to growth in home energy retrofits, said home energy efficiency instructor Jeff Catlin: Contractors who used to do just new construction and remodels are turning to weatherization to ride out the construction downturn.

Catlin’s Energy Conservation Training Company offers a three-week training in home energy efficiency through Mt. Hood Community College. After a recent open house, 50 unemployed workers with building trade experience applied for WorkSource Oregon training grants to pay for the course.

The home energy-efficiency career ladder starts with the workers who make up the four- to five-person weatherization crews, and progresses to crew leaders and home energy auditors like those employed by Energy Trust. At the high end of the skills spectrum are home energy analysts who know how to use equipment like smoke puffers and blower doors to see where air is getting into houses, and duct blasters to see where ducts are leaking. Contractors also need to learn the nitty-gritty of incentive programs in order to communicate with homeowners.

Catlin trains people to use the equipment, and points to one sign the industry is booming: There’s a two-month backlog ordering equipment like blower doors.

It’s a good time for entrepreneurs to get in, said the Energy Trust’s Lacey.

“In home energy efficiency, small contractors can start a business fairly inexpensively,” Lacey said. “A lot of money is coming to the state and to the Northwest to do this work.”

Marshall Runkel, longtime aide to former Portland City Commissioner Erik Sten, left his city job last year to help a friend start a home energy retrofit business.

“The work I did today putting insulation in somebody’s wall,” Runkel said, “will prevent a ton of carbon from being released into the atmosphere, every year, until that house falls down.”