Clean Energy Jobs Can Help the Economy Recover

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Renewable energy has kept the country going with clean, reliable electricity. While renewables have proven to be a stable energy source, industry employment has taken a hit in 2020. More than 131,000 clean energy workers in the Midwest lost their jobs within the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the renewable energy industry is taking matters into their own hands to help, and it turns out clean energy jobs may be able to help restart the economy.

According to a new report from Clean Jobs Midwest, more than 744,000 people from 12 Midwestern states were employed in clean energy jobs before COVID-19. The growth rate of clean energy jobs pre-Coronavirus was more than twice as fast as overall employment in the Midwest, and were growing in nearly all 50 states. By the end of the decade, more Midwesterners worked in a clean energy job than real estate agents and brokers, computer programmers, web developers, and restaurant wait staff combined. Many of these jobs can be found in big cities like Chicago (88,930), Detroit (55,470) and Minneapolis (38,920). The majority of clean energy jobs in 2019 were in construction (41.7 percent) and manufacturing (30.2 percent). Michigan and Illinois had the highest number of people employed in the clean energy industry in the Midwest, with over 125,000 clean energy workers employed in each state.

Clean energy jobs include energy efficiency, renewable energy, advanced transportation, grid and storage, and clean fuels. From the renewable energy sector, job opportunities include transportation and shipping, law, finance, technology and many more. Other industries in the report included professional services, trade, agriculture and forestry, utilities and other services.

Positions within the renewable energy sector include jobs in the wind and solar industry. With over 87,000 workers, renewable energy was the third-largest clean energy employer in the Midwest, behind energy efficiency jobs (534,567) and advanced transportation (87,993). Illinois had the highest number of people employed in the renewable energy industry in the Midwest, with over 17,000 workers.

Solar and wind were the largest employers in the renewable energy sector, with 40,508 and 36,298 jobs, respectively. In fact, solar installer is the fastest-growing job in the nation, and has a median annual pay of $44,890, a nearly five percent increase from 2018. Even through the pandemic, solar is persevering. In Minnesota, for example, solar was deemed an "essential service," which enabled installers to go back to work. Now, the construction and installation of solar projects and community gardens are matching levels of progression from before the pandemic. Wind turbine technician is the second-fastest growing job, and has a yearly salary of $52,910. It has also been deemed an "essential service" in several other states.

According to the study, more than one in five clean energy jobs in 2019 were located in rural areas - that's more than 158,000 jobs for America's heartland. Rural counties looking for an economic boost also receive the benefits of good-paying local jobs in areas that are not otherwise going to attract larger businesses. Bigger corporations with large staff needs are not likely to locate in smaller populated areas, regardless of how much land might be available for development. That makes renewable energy developments the perfect partner for these communities. Rural areas offer the wide-open spaces necessary for wind and solar projects and they can offer a diversified income stream, well-paid jobs for

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the community and tax revenue stream for counties and townships. This influx of jobs creates an economic ripple effect as construction workers rent property or stay in hotels, dine at local restaurants, shop at grocery stores and fill their tanks at the local gas stations

Nationwide, there are 250,000 Americans working in the solar industry, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA). The American Wind Energy Association (AWEA) reports that the U.S. wind industry supported 120,000 jobs, including more than 530 wind manufacturing facilities that employ 26,000 people, and are located in 43 states. The renewable energy industry offers many opportunities to our country's veterans as well. The American wind industry hires veterans at a rate 67 percent higher than the average U.S. industry. In 2019, 11 percent of the clean energy workforce were veterans - twice the amount of veterans in the overall workforce.

Clean energy jobs were on the right track before the pandemic, and utilities across the Midwest are rolling out new investments to aid in the COVID-19 recovery process. After the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) and Department of Commerce requested that utilities get involved, Xcel Energy recently proposed to accelerate $3 billion in energy investments - a decision that will create 5,000 new jobs in the state. In Illinois, utilities are planning to contribute $47 million to a COVID-19 Bill Pay Assistance Program.

Although the new decade has had an unexpected start with some significant losses, there are still wins to be had. A recent study from BW Research indicated that nationwide, more than 100,000 clean energy jobs were added last month. This slight rebound offers hope that the growth of the renewable energy industry is still underway, and companies will be on the look-out to capitalize on low-cost ways to energize their workforce. Before the pandemic, more than 20 percent of clean energy jobs were located in the Midwest, and the industry added more than 7,500 jobs in 2019. Clean energy companies in the Midwest anticipated a five percent growth rate in their workforces (nearly 37,000 jobs). The good news is that clean energy jobs will continue to offer unique, family-supporting opportunities which will provide stability for Americans across the Midwest and help rejuvenate the economy - and that's just smart!

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