

Green jobs and the transition to an environmentally sustainable economy

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Last week, New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli issued an excellent analysis of the growth of green jobs in New York State and the potential for additional growth in the future. According to the [comptroller's report](#):

"There were 1.7 million green [jobs](#) in New York in 2019, 17.3 percent of total employment... Green jobs constitute a smaller share of State employment than the national average (18.8 percent), and New York trails neighboring states such as Pennsylvania (20.9 percent) and New Jersey (18.5 percent), midwestern states like Illinois (21.4 percent), as well as large states like California (18.2 percent). Between 2015 and 2019, green jobs grew by 13.2 percent, more than twice the rate of total job growth (6 percent)."

The pandemic resulted in [job losses](#) throughout the [economy](#), including the green economy. According to DiNapoli's report, in New York State: "Between 2019 and 2020, green jobs declined by over 527,000 jobs to 1.1 million and 12.9 percent of total State employment." This trend was seen nationally during the pandemic, with the first loss of green jobs since measurement began a little more than a decade ago. But as recovery began in 2021, the green economy recovered more rapidly than the economy as a whole.

According to [E2](#), a national organization of environmental entrepreneurs:

"Economic conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the previous administration's animosity toward clean energy, resulted in the first decline in clean energy jobs in America since E2 began tracking

such occupations nearly a decade ago and the only decline on record since E2 began producing its annual Clean Jobs America reports. Yet data indicates that clean energy jobs were more resilient and are recovering more quickly than overall economy. By June of last year, more than 620,000 clean energy workers had lost their jobs since the COVID-19 pandemic began spreading widely three months earlier, according to analysis of unemployment data by E2 and partners. After losses peaked at the end of May 2020, jobs grew by more than 11 percent compared to about 9 percent across the U.S. economy overall. In fact, by the end of 2020 more than half of the clean energy jobs lost between March and May had been regained, leaving the number of [clean energy](#) jobs lost since COVID 19 at about 307,000."

COVID, the Trump presidency, the horrific invasion of Ukraine, and other world crises may delay the transition to a green economy but will not prevent it. Just as [global supply chains](#) have been upended, their economic logic continues regardless. So too, with the green economy. While there is little question that the green economy is growing, there are major problems in defining that part of the economy precisely. According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#):

"Green jobs are either: Jobs in businesses that produce goods or provide services that benefit the environment or conserve natural resources...[or] Jobs in which workers' duties involve making their establishment's production processes more environmentally friendly or use fewer natural resources."

The Bureau measured green jobs for a few years but, due to budget reductions, ended its count in 2013. A report by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce entitled "[State of Green: The Definition and Measurement of Green Jobs](#)" observed that:

"Many different stakeholders have attempted to define and count green

accurately; all have come upon the same problems. How to define an amorphous and still-emerging concept and how to count something when it does not easily fit into current coding systems have all been answered in a variety of ways by different parties... Yet while there is a growing body of literature on the subject, the green jobs picture still remains fuzzy. This is due in part to the lack of consensus on a definition, but is also due to the lack of helpful information on projections and nationwide data."

A more recent report (December 2019) by Amanda Novello and Greg Carlock of the Century Foundation does an excellent job of defining the various dimensions of green employment. They chart the history of green jobs along with the evolution of environmentalism from conservation to regulation to a contemporary definition that includes equity and investment. Novello and Carlock note that:

"The standard definition of green jobs used by the BLS in their study captures ideas from all three waves of environmentalism...including work in conservation, regulation, and all major sectors targeted for decarbonization...The definition classifies green jobs into three major categories: renewable energy production, energy efficiency, and environmental management."

Their study reports some of the differing estimates of the size of the green economy and concludes that:

"The wide variation in estimates of the size of the green economy point to the limitations of patchwork research on the subject and the need for a government funded initiative to study the sector, or simply to reauthorize and appropriate the BLS to continue where they left off."

In the spirit of the Green New Deal, they then connect health care, education, and efforts to increase gender and racial equity as essential to

a sustainable economy. They also note that the workforce engaged in the Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of green jobs tends to be male, while the workforce engaged in the broader sustainable economy especially in health care and education, tends to be female.

As the field of sustainability management evolves, we have seen the emergence of distinct subfields that will benefit from study and analysis. The Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of green jobs is focused on environmental sustainability. Issues of workplace equity and community impact are two other distinct but interrelated subfields of sustainability management. Each subfield requires its own distinct measures. Green jobs should be defined as supporting environmental sustainability. Other measures can be used to measure organizational equity and diversity and the impact of an organization on the communities it interacts with. The effort to broaden the definition of green jobs is reminiscent of the effort to include "social infrastructure" with physical infrastructure in the Biden "Build Back Better" bill. While there is no question that these social programs are essential to a sustainable economy, combining all these activities seems to lead to confusion and conceptual ambiguity and, in the case of Build Back Better, political failure. In sum, we should not expect green jobs to lead to a sustainable economy but to environmental sustainability. Comprehensive economic sustainability will require more than environmental sustainability.

The New York State comptroller's report on green jobs discussed the need for worker education and training to enable current workers to retool for some of the high-skill jobs of the [green economy](#). Many green jobs require workers to learn how to design, manage, build, and maintain new technologies. Electric vehicles are a good example of this. Maintenance of these vehicles will require that auto mechanics receive the training needed to maintain a very different type of vehicle than the one they are familiar with. While [electric vehicles](#) require less maintenance than internal combustion-powered vehicles, they will still

break down and need to be repaired and maintained. These mechanical skills are likely to be scarce early on and, for that reason, should command a higher wage than one earned by today's auto mechanics. Training programs for these new skills that are funded by government could be targeted to overcome traditional gender and racial biases.

The transition to environmental sustainability has begun, and it is important that it is connected to economic development and job creation. While there never has been an economy-wide trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth, there are always examples of jobs lost due to environmental rules. Jobs in coal mining and fracking will be reduced due to decarbonization. The people who hold those jobs should be given training for [green jobs](#) and preferences in hiring for those jobs.

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