

'Green' jobs can help us rebuild Valley economy

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By Tim O'Connor and Paul McLain-Lugowski

According to the Employment Development Department, the unemployment rate in the San Joaquin Valley reached 11.1% for the month of October, compared to a rate of 8.2% for California and 6.5% for the rest of the country.

With this stifled growth of industry, business and job development in our region, Valley residents must find innovative solutions that promise a greater economic future, and government representatives must respond with bold and creative solutions that promote and reward them.

This month, the next major step toward stimulating economic opportunity, job growth and lasting stability is evidenced by the state Air Resources Board's vote to adopt a climate change scoping plan under AB 32.

The answer for the Valley is simple: The scoping plan must promote green-collar job development, sustainable agriculture, air quality protection and progressive environmental and economic initiatives.

The air board has proposed a mix of regulations that will change the way that energy is produced and used in the state, shifting our economy toward a greener, more sustainable path.

Both the supply and demand of green jobs in the Valley will grow as the state mandates increasing renewable electricity, more energy efficient buildings and better natural resource management.

According to a recent report commissioned by the American Solar Energy Society, 8.5 million jobs currently exist in renewable and energy efficiency industries throughout the country, with the number increasing to 40 million jobs by 2030. Further, in jobs involving water conservation and sustainable agriculture, workers can earn a good wage while improving local natural resources.

Nowhere else in the state is the untapped potential of a greener economy more evident or needed than in the Valley. As the agricultural backbone of California, careers in the green-collar work force can blossom quickly and provide a stable framework for rural communities.

Further, with more sunny days than other parts of the state, California's solar power industry has a great new home. The air quality and economic improvements green jobs can offer are long overdue here.

By working in conjunction with local, regional and national organizations to build a coalition in support of the green-collar economy, cities in the Valley can partner to get our local economy back on its feet.

State lawmakers are currently crafting alternative-energy priorities, such as requiring a third of the state's energy to be produced from renewable resources.

Just last month, elected officials, community leaders and environmental activists came together for the green-collar job forum Greening San Joaquin at the University of the Pacific. The forum outlined steps that must be taken to facilitate green-collar job growth and highlighted many green-collar job resources in the region:

Expand and fund highly effective existing green-jobs training programs such as those being operated by YouthBuild and Conservation Corps. These programs prepare young adults, including many who are disenfranchised, for entry into new and demanding green occupations, or apprenticeships offering credentials in trades related to the green economy. Pacific Gas & Electric Power Pathways also offers job training and youth development programs focused on green-collar job growth.

Enter a green job education program at a local community college. Fresno City College provides training in HVAC and industrial electronics, and also has Green Job Apprenticeship Programs. San Joaquin Delta College presents a multitude of trainings and also offers Green Job Apprenticeship Programs.

Tap into government-sponsored green-jobs placement assistance. The California Employment Development Department offers a searchable database of more than 10,000 approved training programs throughout California. The California Employment Development Department's Youth Employment Opportunity Program offers special services to young adults ages 15 to 21, including peer advising, referrals to supportive services, workshops, job referrals and placement assistance.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Job Corps offers free education, job training and paid apprenticeship programs for multiple career types -- including jobs in the energy, construction, automotive and transportation sectors, to people ages 16 to 24.

We must move forward to green the Valley's environment and economic future. To accomplish this, we must not only create local opportunities for our residents to access green jobs, we should remind our leaders of the tremendous need and opportunity in the Valley.

If we can accomplish this, the Valley will be better equipped to remain economically competitive for decades to come.

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