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Green jobs don't grow on trees

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

After several years of hype about the potential for "green jobs," it's becoming clear they don't grow on trees.

But green jobs aren't just a fantasy either. A few of us are lucky enough to already have green jobs, and a multitude of efforts have been launched to create more.

Q: So what exactly is a green job?

A: Any position that substantially involves environmental protection might be considered a green job, including manufacturing, agriculture, retail, service, research, education and administration jobs.

A 2008 state-funded study identified 47,194 existing private-sector green jobs in Washington, or 1.6 percent of total state private-sector employment. That provides a useful baseline but isn't definitive, since many jobs don't fit neatly into a green box.

Q: Why are government officials, from the president on down, so enamored with green jobs?

A: The green-jobs bandwagon was initially powered by the idea that workers who lost manufacturing jobs such as making heavy machinery could find similar jobs making green equipment such as solar panels or wind turbines.

Efforts to develop those types of high-profile alternative-energy jobs continue, with limited results so far. Meanwhile, the green jobs focus has expanded to include disparate fields from organic agriculture to waste reduction.

Any new jobs help the economy, but green jobs provide a bonus to society because of the environmental advantages of the company's products or services. Employees may also benefit directly from green jobs, if they use fewer toxic chemicals in their work, for instance.

Q: Doesn't concern about the environment actually eliminate more jobs than it creates?

A: Certain environmental campaigns such as minimizing packaging or stopping junk mail could conceivably reduce jobs. However, environmental advocates maintain that those efforts have overall benefits, and that greener alternatives can provide just as many jobs, if not more.

Q: How do I get a green job?

A: It depends on the position, so let's look at three main categories:

â€¢ **Laborer or factory jobs.** Often the most available green jobs, these are found through the usual employment channels, including online listings, newspaper ads and referrals.

These may be entry-level jobs but also make good lateral moves, since a green job might be cleaner and healthier than a similar, not-so-green position with the same wage. Green jobs for disabled workers are frequently offered through organizations such as Northwest Center and Goodwill Industries.

â€¢ **Blue-collar jobs** where special training is required. Opportunities for these green jobs, which sometimes pay upward of

\$50,000 a year, have blossomed as training efforts have increased. South Seattle Community College, for example, offers training programs for energy auditors (home-conservation advisers).

Space can be tight in green-jobs-training classes, but a recent shot of federal funding should significantly expand those programs. Several major corporations have also launched green-jobs training.

â€¢ **Professional-level jobs.** Governments and utilities already have hundreds of these green positions, many of them well-paying, from sewage-treatment planning to wildlife management to transit-system design. Openings for these coveted jobs have been scarce lately because of hiring freezes.

The good news is that because many government jobs are filled by baby boomers in their 50s, lots of green jobs will become available in a few years when those folks retire. Obtaining an undergraduate or graduate degree in a green field can help prepare you to step into those positions.

Jobs at green nonprofits usually don't pay as much as government jobs, but they can be extremely rewarding. One trick for breaking in with a government or nonprofit is to do volunteer work or intern for them.

Q: Any final tips?

A: The best way to find a green job might be to create your own. The demand for green products and services has never been greater, so if you have a bright idea for a new business, why not go for it? Entrepreneurs will build the future, one green job at a time.

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