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PERSPECTIVES

**SEARCHING FOR
COMMON GROUND IN A
COMPLEX WORLD**

Green Collar Jobs

An Opportunity For Environmentalists and Economists Alike
by Gerry Gray

The phrase “green collar job” conveys a sense of hope about innovative activities that will address both major environmental concerns and our ailing economy.

Volunteers from the Parks and People Foundation prepare the soil for planting

The term “green collar jobs,” unheard of only twenty years ago, has become increasingly common in recent years. In particular, the phrase has surfaced in discussions about energy and climate change policy. It is the focus of the new Green Jobs Act of 2007, is included in major legislative proposals on climate change, and has been featured in the campaigns of several presidential candidates, including President-elect Obama’s campaign.

Increased attention to green collar jobs is creating a lot of excitement across the board, and also, as with any promising concept that comes into the spotlight, generating a lot of questions, which has led to discussions that hold massive potential for both the economy and the environment. This is a critical time for forestry and natural resource communities to engage in these discussions and take advantage of the opportunities they hold for restoring both urban and rural ecosystems, and for stimulating an innovative green economy.

THE EMERGENCE OF GREEN COLLAR JOBS

As with most terms, it’s difficult to attribute the phrase “green collar job” to any one source. The term is often attributed to Alan Durning, director of the Sightline Institute in Seattle, who wrote a book titled *Green Collar Jobs* in 1999. The book focused on the transition in the Pacific Northwest from timber-dependent economies to other economic activities, and related green collar jobs to the products and services of forests and natural ecosystems.

American Forests magazine called attention to the term in a March/April 1992 review of *The Environmental Career Guide* by Nicholas Basta, which spoke of rapidly increased spending on environmental clean up, the emergence of the “green-collar worker,” and introduced a range of “green-collar jobs” in business, government, and citizens.

“Green collar” took on further meaning in 2004 when San Francisco State University Professor of Urban Studies Raquel Pinderhughes did a study of “green collar jobs” and defined them as “manual-labor jobs in businesses (or other enterprises) whose



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Materials from the Obama-Biden campaign propose

products and services directly improve environmental quality.” Her study, commissioned by the City of Berkeley’s Office of Energy and Sustainable Development, identified 22 economic sectors that include green collar jobs, such as green building, energy retrofits, and sustainable food production.

Perhaps the individual most widely recognized for advancing the term “green collar jobs” is Van Jones, who heads the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, California. In 2007, Jones led a coalition of business, labor, and environmental groups that urged the Oakland City Council to provide \$250,000 for a green collar job corps to train

ness of and strengthen links between healthy forest ecosystems and the communities’ social and economic well-being.

Over the past two decades, there has been a shift in federal policy towards ecosystem management and forest restoration. This shift suggested the need for a skilled workforce to meet the expected demand for high-quality restoration work in both rural and urban areas. We have worked towards meeting this need with an array of partners, including social science researchers, diverse forest worker groups, youth conservation corps, labor unions, and urban forestry groups. With these partners, we identified the skills needed for on-the-ground restoration activities, such as planting trees, thinning forests of excessive small trees, improving watersheds and fish and wildlife habitat, removing invasive species, and repairing degraded infrastructure.

In addition, AMERICAN FORESTS has recently worked with local and regional partners in the west to call attention to opportunities for integrated strategies that reduce wildfire threats and improve the health and function of forest ecosystems by thinning small-diameter trees and then using those trees as materials for value-added products, such as flooring and furniture, or for renewable energy production. We are also identifying restoration projects that can enhance the capacity of forests to sequester and store carbon, and thus, help mitigate climate change.

We have also encouraged education and training programs to address the range of needed restoration skills - from local volunteers doing “citizen science” and tree planting, to scientists and professionals developing new information and approaches - and the demographic needs of communities, such as targeting training to youth, displaced workers, low-income families, or multi-cultural groups.

When Van Jones began his efforts on green collar jobs, he saw a growing green economy in Oakland and realized that low-income, urban minorities were totally left out, but saw that the two issues could be linked. He saw renewable energy standards and investments in renewable and clean technologies, such as wind-energy production, which would create demands for workers that would quickly outstrip the supply of skilled labor.

He also saw opportunities in these manual-labor, place-based industries, such as retrofitting buildings and constructing wind farms. It is not the type of work that can be outsourced, so “green-collar-jobs training gave people from disadvantaged backgrounds a competitive edge in the marketplace.”

Labor unions have also joined the increasing numbers of supporters for green collar jobs. Change to Win, a coalition of seven unions with six



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the establishment of training programs and initiatives to create new green jobs through investments in a “clean energy economy.”

Above, in Baltimore, workers make their way to a new planting site

low-income youth in renewable energy, organic food, and green-construction industries. He also helped draft and advocate for the federal Green Jobs Act of 2007, which passed as part of EISA, and, in February 2008, founded Green For All, a national advocacy organization dedicated to building an inclusive green economy.

UNDERSTANDING GREEN COLLAR JOBS

The phrase “green collar job” conveys a sense of hope about innovative activities that will address both major environmental concerns and our ailing economy. While the term has gained increasing support in this broad sense, it may be seen from many different perspectives, and questions arise about what it really means. To what degree does it focus on urban or rural areas? Lower or higher skill workers? Lower or higher quality jobs? Energy, climate change, or other environmental issues? Where will the focus be? What type of green economy and green collar jobs will be developed? Who will benefit?

AMERICAN FORESTS has worked with community-based forestry partners for more than a decade to understand green collar workers, also known as ecosystem restoration workers, to heighten aware-

million members, recently organized around the “growing connection between the environmental movement and the workers’ movement.” A key concern of the unions is that green collar jobs not become sweatshop jobs. They need to be living-wage jobs, with benefits.

ADVOCATING FOR GREEN COLLAR JOBS

Much of the current policy discussion about green collar jobs is being shaped by the dialogue about the Green Jobs Act of 2007. Passed as part of the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, the Green Jobs Act authorizes \$125 million to establish an energy efficiency and renewable energy worker-training program, which would provide competitive grants to non-profit partnerships and states to carry out such programs.

The program targets individuals who can especially benefit from such training, including unemployed workers, veterans and at-risk youth. The program also has a special demonstration program focused on “pathways out of poverty.” In addition, it establishes a research program to monitor and analyze the effects of the Green Jobs Act.

Materials from the Obama-Biden campaign propose the establishment of training programs and initiatives to create new green jobs through investments in a “clean energy economy.” Their plan invests in “America’s highly-skilled manufacturing workforce” to ensure that workers have the skills and tools they need to pioneer the green technologies that will be in demand throughout the world.

While we support initiatives to build a clean energy economy, our vision of green collar jobs includes larger components focused on restoring the health of natural ecosystems and investing in innovative economic enterprises in rural and urban landscapes.

AMERICAN FORESTS, with the help of its partners, will build and carry forward a policy platform on green collar jobs. A proposal on which we’ve been working calls for an “Ecosystem Restoration Workforce” that would revitalize the “Civilian Conservation Corps” with a focus on training skilled workers and creating quality jobs in order to restore the health and function of our nation’s natural ecosystems and stimulate innovative green economic activities. Key elements of this proposal include:

- 1) A green worker training program focused on the restoration of natural ecosystems and markets for ecosystem services;
- 2) Increased investments in public programs focused on restoring the health of natural ecosystems in rural and urban landscapes;
- 3) Grants and financial incentives for community-scaled businesses focused on ecosystem services and products;
- 4) Grants and technical assistance to communities

for developing local understanding, collaborative strategies, and innovative enterprises and projects to address climate change and energy security;

- 5) Research to address data gaps, develop information, and monitor trends related to the green economy.

Please share with us your ideas on what a green economy and green collar jobs mean to you by visiting our website. It is time for us all to engage in the growing policy debate on a green economy and to advocate for our vision of green collar jobs.

Gerry Gray is AMERICAN FORESTS’ VP, Forest Policy

GREEN COLLAR JOBS: A GOOD START

Green collar jobs are an important first step for rebuilding the natural systems that maintain the planet’s ecosystem. This is an effort that screams for the support of the Congress and all of us as citizens, because we have been dismantling the natural systems in this country for several hundred years and desperately need to reverse the trend. Green collar jobs will provide the labor force needed to start the repair of green infrastructure. However, we also need teams of scientists and white collar workers to figure out how to rebuild the system in its entirety.

Rebuilding nature is about rebuilding a natural, organic system. It is a challenge that is more complex and more comprehensive than fixing a few broken pieces, no matter how unique or important those pieces might be. It is only when all the environment’s systems are fully functional that it produces the basic life support system on which we depend for clean air and water, and healthy flora and fauna. It’s a lot like the human body. Your heart is a critical organ, but it is a piece of your vascular system. Your doctor evaluates your health by looking at your entire vascular system, not just your heart. The same is true of nature. We can’t just save certain pieces and still have a healthy environment.

We need to discard our old way of thinking about saving the environment, and embrace a new model. The environment is not some special place far away from our community; it is everywhere, and every place matters. Look for more about this new model in our spring issue.

~ Gary Moll

*AMERICAN FORESTS’ Senior Vice President,
Urban Ecosystems*

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