Public News Service - OR » January 27, 2016

Solar Jobs: Get Your Feet Warm, and Get In Early

PORTLAND, Ore. - The job's report remains "sunny" for Oregon's solar energy sector. According to the National Solar Jobs Census of 2015, produced by the Solar Foundation, the industry added workers 12-times faster than the jobs growth rate for the whole U.S. economy last year.

The Energy Trust of Oregon saw a boom in business as well. The nonprofit Trust helps people navigate the switch to solar, and it processed nearly twice as many applications for panels as the year before.

Going forward, while the pace of growth is expected to dip slightly, that won't stop the industry from hiring. Craig Ernst, development director of the Oregon Solar Energy Industries Association, says there are a number of ways to break into solar.

"There's several programs, renewable energy training programs, joint-apprenticeship programs, through the Clackamas Community College and through Columbia Gorge Community College," says Ernst.

In other parts of the country, the Department of Energy has its own plan to train 75,000 veterans by 2020.

Nationally, solar production expanded by 20 percent last year and coal fell by 10 percent, although solar jobs haven't eclipsed the older industry's just yet. But expected smaller output, combined with a bill proposed to make Oregon coal-free by 2030, puts solar in a position to gain even more ground in the new year.

The Solar Foundation's communication manager Billy Connelly says now that it's proven itself, people should pursue any opportunity they have to be part of the solar workforce.

"Be open to starting at any level that you can get into based on your skill set and experience and work your way up," says Connelly.

The fast-growing German company SolarWorld is building a second expansion to its U.S. headquarters in Oregon and plans to hire more workers.

Oregon's Bureau of Labor and Industries has details on apprenticeships throughout the sector, at oregon.gov/boli/atd.

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