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State has serious green-collar labor shortage, summit attendees say

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California's new green tech economy won't get very far if the state doesn't develop the workforce that eco-friendly businesses need, corporate and government leaders said Monday at a summit on what are being called green-collar jobs.

Already, the state lacks enough solar panel installers to keep up with demand, and electrical utilities trying to expand their use of renewable power have a hard time finding qualified workers, said panelists at the Advancing the New Energy Economy summit in San Francisco.

It isn't just a question of finding enough college-educated engineers. The green-tech industry also will need thousands of skilled laborers, people trained in construction and electrical work.

If California schools don't start training young people for those jobs, the green-tech industry will either move elsewhere or import skilled workers from outside the state. And working-class Californians, who could fill many green jobs with the right preparation, will find themselves locked out of the new economy.

"This labor will literally be bused past the very communities, the very constituents we're here to serve," said Timothy Simon, a member of the California Public Utilities Commission who organized the summit. "That's what I'm trying to avoid."

The concern isn't new.

As the green-tech industry takes root, cities throughout the Bay Area have tried to lure young companies that design new fuels, cut pollution and devise more efficient ways to use power. Most of the companies are startups that have tiny staffs but hold the promise of growth and jobs. Bay Area cities badly want those jobs to go to their own residents.

This summit, however, differed from others on the topic in one important way. Rather than just discuss the issue, several of the participants announced specific programs to boost the number of jobs in green tech, albeit in a broad definition of the term.

-- Pacific Gas and Electric Co. has created a community college program to train the next generation of linemen, the people responsible for maintaining or repairing the utility's 139,000 miles of electrical lines.

The first classes in the PowerPathway program will start this year and offer graduates a direct path into jobs with the company. City College of San Francisco, College of San Mateo and Laney

College in Oakland are participating, and most course tuition will be covered by grants. For more information, go to the program's Web site: www.pge.com/careers/powerpathway.

-- Simon and all the state's major utilities have put together a workforce advisory board that will work with the state's colleges to make sure students receive the skills that the utilities and the new green economy need. Unlike the PowerPathway program, the advisory board is still taking shape.

-- The Home Builders Association of Northern California said it would dramatically increase the energy efficiency of the homes its members build and cut the amount of greenhouse gases associated with those homes. That will boost the number of jobs for people skilled at solar installation and green-building techniques.

Power lines and home construction sites are a far cry from the research labs and ethanol refineries the public typically associates with green tech. But much of the green economy will depend on people building things, such as homes that use less power and transmission lines for wind farms.

"If we're going to meet these challenges, we're going to have to weatherize millions of buildings," said Van Jones, co-founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. "We're going to have to install millions of solar panels, build thousands of wind farms. That's millions of jobs."

Business executives, meanwhile, said they already have a hard time finding as many skilled workers as they need. Peter Darbee, the chief executive officer of San Francisco's PG&E, said 42 percent of his company's 20,000 employees will be eligible for retirement within five years.

"What we find is it's very difficult to fill all the jobs," he said, laying some of the blame on the state's educational system. "It's currently not producing the quality or the quantity of people we need."

Jay Hansen, legislative and political director for the State Building and Construction Trades Council, said California needs to offer more vocational training in high school. His field already accounts for roughly 400,000 California jobs paying \$50,000 through \$70,000 per year, and more are on the way.

"We're not going to be able to build anything and do any green retrofits until we have a workforce to do that," he said. "If we wait until they're out of high school to start training them, we're going to lose a lot of people."

Marshall Drummond, chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District, agreed his schools needed to revamp their curricula in order to train a green workforce. He noted, however, that it's difficult to do when schools face the threat of budget cuts. The budget emergency announced last week by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger could hit community colleges hard.

"Our annual budget looks like the Richter scale during an earthquake - up and down every year," Drummond said.

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