

What Green Jobs?

Washington is spending \$60 billion to create the careers of the future, but not a single green job yet exists. Obama's 'green czar' explains.

By **Daniel Stone** | Newsweek Web Exclusive

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President Obama devoted nearly \$60 billion of his stimulus package to building a new green-based economy rich in renewable energy and strategies to cut carbon. But despite the price tag, not one green job yet exists. It comes down to a problem of etymology. No one can yet agree on what a green job actually is. The working definition paints a broad stroke: a job that's good for the economy while simultaneously healing the earth. But that leaves lots open to interpretation—natural gas is technically a cleaner fuel than crude oil, but it's still unsustainable—making it difficult, if not impossible, to measure whether eco-based jobs are being created and whether, as the administration has claimed, they're the saviors of a sagging economy.

In large part, the very idea behind a green job ensures there will never be a full definition, but the Bureau of Labor Statistics agreed in April to start measuring data on them. (Critics, in response, quickly suspected that the BLS, an agency supposed to measure objective data, could soon help carry water for an administration eager to show the stimulus is working.) Several environmental advocates polled by NEWSWEEK defined green jobs the way Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously defined obscenity: I'll know it when I see it.

The man beginning to field questions on whether Obama's green-jobs strategy is working is Van Jones, who started an environmental nonprofit called Green for All before joining the administration in March. Now, a senior adviser for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, Jones is tasked with leading the administration's crusade for a green-based economy. On the road in Indiana, Jones spoke to NEWSWEEK's Daniel Stone. Excerpts:

Why are we still without an objective definition of a green job?

Well, we still don't have a unified definition, and that's not unusual in a democracy. It takes a while for all the states and the federal government to come to some agreement. But the Department of Labor is working on it very diligently. Fundamentally, it's getting there, but we haven't crossed the finish line yet.

A huge chunk of the stimulus went toward renewable energy and creating these green jobs.

Can you point to any returns?

One of the great things is that we get to see these success stories as they begin to happen. Right now I'm in Indiana, and there's a conference for weatherization workers. Usually there are about 700 people at it; today there are 3,200 people and a good chunk of them are newly trained weatherization workers, going out and cutting energy bills. I'm looking at a lot of people who are fired up and ready to go. You're also starting to see employers making different decisions because of the stimulus package. You have companies like Siemens, [which] announced a couple months ago that it's going to be building a turbine plant, hiring hundreds of workers just because they recognize the [government's] commitment to clean energy.

At this point is the only feedback anecdotal?

Yes, we have a lot of anecdotal evidence because the concrete numbers aren't ready. But we can point to places like Kansas City, Mo., where weatherization dollars are being used in creative ways to help retrofit a neighborhood and influence mass transit. Once the stimulus starts working, you see the shift among entrepreneurs and private industry. We're excited to see the level of interest that we're seeing. We know there's tremendous private-sector interest. The last part of the economy to freeze was the green part. There was still growth in the solar and wind industries up until the last quarter of last year. And it looks like the first sector to unthaw will be the green parts.

The package was sold on reviving the economy. But there seems to be a numbers problem with the notion of green jobs. The president has said more than 4 million jobs, yet that number is far less than we've already lost.

It's not a numbers problem, it's all angle. The recovery package was \$787 billion, but the green part was about \$60 billion. Still, the green part is playing a central role in the recovery but is part of a much bigger effort. It's also important for people to know that when you're talking about people putting up a turbine, you're exactly right, it doesn't take many people to put one in the ground. But it does take a lot of people to manufacture one. We're talking 8,000 manufactured parts, as much steel as 26 cars. When you talk about tapping our full resource of wind, we need to make a whole bunch of those. If you want to have the jobs of tomorrow, we've got to start making the product of tomorrow. One of the biggest multi-billion-dollar plays we can make is clean energy.

Still, it doesn't take that many people to run a wind turbine plant, right?

We need to get into a position where you're manufacturing those wind turbines and you're putting them up and you're maintaining them. You're also manufacturing and deploying solar technology and biofuels and advanced geothermal. Now you can see how that creates ripple effects. The same thing is true for the energy-efficiency side. Look at a home: you have the worker putting in insulation. Where did she buy that insulation? Maybe she's putting in a new boiler and furnace, but where did she get them? Who made them? There are ripple effects. You're stimulating local small businesses, and you're saving people money they were spending on their utility bill.

There are plenty of skeptics that say you can't save the economy and the earth at the same time. You can have investment incentives and cut taxes to spur growth and you can enact blunt carbon-cutting measures, but when you do the two simultaneously, it dilutes both efforts.

[Coughs.]

Are you OK?

I was just chocking on that false choice [*Laughs*]. That's clearly a false choice. That's like saying, "Who do you love more, your kids or your grandkids?" You either care about your kids so you grow the economy but do it in a way that's polluting. Or you care about your grandkids so you're going to stop polluting and stall the economy and starve your kids. False choice! You can enhance your economic performance by enhancing your environmental performance. Certainly it's true in the energy sector. The wastefulness of the way we used to do things has to be taken into account.

True, but isn't it hard to convince people of that when nothing of this scale has ever been done before?

Look, every time we heard these arguments, they've been wrong. Back when we debated the first Clean Air Act, we heard that if we tried to do anything to clean the air up, it would destroy the economy. But in fact, the minute the rules were clear, U.S. business outperformed anyone in terms of driving costs down. The economy actually got better. At some point, history should matter. We always overshoot our expectation once the rules are clear and you unleash innovation.

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