

Welcome to the fudgy, grey world of green jobs.

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The many shades of green

Drawing boundaries around green jobs is a subjective art

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Editor

Imagine reading this job description:

Must have experience in one or more of the following: renewable energy, waste reduction, resource utilization (or nonutilization, really) and environmental sustainability and preservation (inquire within for technical description). Job involves these things either in part or in whole and is either production- or service-based (though we can't tell you which one). If you think you qualify (and you probably do), apply at your nearest state labor information office.

Welcome to the fudgy, gray world of green jobs. While politicians and environmental advocates promote the promise of green jobs, labor economists have been, well, laboring over how to define and count them.

Even the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the nation's arbiter of all things jobs, is stumped. It's been looking at the green jobs issue for a couple of years now. In 2009, it joined forces with state labor economists on a working council to examine the matter more closely. One of its first tasks was to review what had been done to date.

"The general impression was there was no consensus on the definition of green jobs," said Dixie Sommers, BLS assistant commissioner for occupational

statistics and employment projections. The bureau now is in the throes of a formal, \$8 million study "to identify green economic activity and produce data on the associated jobs."

State labor departments and others are also spending time and money playing definitional catch-up in hopes of getting a better grasp of what green jobs are, and are not. While many jobs might appear green on the surface, a little definitional scratching shows that many have only a green veneer.

Unfortunately, green jobs don't fit well into the hierarchy of traditional job classifications that researchers use to tally employment. Current methods are akin to counting apples using the alphabet. Labor economists are developing methodologies to better bridge this measurement gap, but in doing so, considerable subjectivity seeps in, leaving virtually any methodology open to debate.

A closer look

The BLS has gone further than anyone to identify green-hued areas of the economy.

"As a statistical agency, we're concerned with measuring standard things. But we want to address what's happening in the economy and what people are asking about," said Sommers. The agency undertook similar efforts when

high-tech and information technology jobs were all the rage a decade ago to determine whether a fundamental transformation was occurring in the economy. "One way to find out is to measure it," Sommers said.

The matter is also important, she said, because green policy and investments are going forward despite the lack of good data. Other data-gathering organizations are looking to the agency for leadership. "We knew that states would be pushed to do their own [green] data collection," Sommers said, and the BLS wanted to have some methodological stakes in the ground to help guide those efforts.

Ultimately, the hope is that the BLS will be able to track total employment and wages for businesses producing green goods and services, and to do so at both the industry and the occupation levels, for jobs like geothermal analyst and solar engineer. In other words, it hopes to track green jobs as accurately as positions in a specific industry or trade.

That's no small undertaking; it requires the agency to first settle on a definition of green. In studying the matter, the BLS states that "the common thread through the studies and discussions is that green jobs are jobs related to preserving or restoring the environment." The agency added that other categories like renewable energy, ener-

gy efficiency, pollution mitigation and natural resources conservation are areas "nearly universally cited" in any study or definition of green jobs.

As a general matter, there might not be much to quibble over. But once this definition is applied to the industrial and occupational world, it quickly turns into quicksand. "It's been an interesting exercise, to say the least," said Sommers. "People have different perspectives on this issue."

The central difficulty with defining green jobs is that the concept of green permeates many occupations in some form, and it doesn't fit neatly into the existing framework the government uses to measure jobs, said Steve Hine, research director at the Minnesota Labor Market Information Office. For example, the federal North American Industry Classification System (NAICS)—a go-to source for occupational data—is production oriented, while much of the green economy (like energy conservation and environmental preservation) is less concerned with the direct output of goods.

So the BLS (and some states studying the matter) has developed a hybrid methodology that combines output and process approaches—in other words, identifies firms that either produce green goods or services directly or use environmentally friendly processes and practices—and then counts associated jobs.

