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OPINION

Recruiter's view of green-jobs outlook

BY DOUG THORNER / DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

As the managing director for a professional recruiting and consulting firm in the energy industry, I split my time between seeking job opportunities in the renewable energy and oil and natural-gas sectors.

While I have no allegiance to one over the other, reports of green jobs inspired me to target much of last year's efforts in the renewable sector.

"Green jobs" is a big buzz term, thanks in part to the president's campaign promise to recover our stalled economy. However, the only green jobs I've seen with any consistency in the last couple years are low-paying, temporary positions that are mostly in manufacturing.

As Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Michigan, and Rep. Jay Inslee, D-Washington, reported two years ago, the dirty secret behind many of these green jobs is that they fall short of union leaders' expected standards for pay and working conditions.

I understand that natural gas doesn't carry the same cachet as renewable energy, but I was struck by the under-reporting of this sector's relative job boom. Many times, recruiting conversations with hiring managers, which I expected to be about green jobs, instead centered on the many job opportunities in the natural-gas industry.

More to the point, these are the kind of roles we seek for our consultants: well-compensated, career-track jobs. On average, jobs in the natural-gas industry pay 40 percent more than their green counterparts. And, unlike green jobs that are largely dependent on unpredictable government subsidies, jobs in natural gas are ready to go.

Viewpoint



Doug Thorner

What's more, they appear to be here to stay — an appealing concept for someone who is out to fill jobs in a down economy.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis show that the natural-gas industry supports more than 137,000 jobs in Colorado, accounting for roughly 6 percent of our state's total employment. This quarter, we placed 95 percent of our consultants in natural-gas positions.

While natural gas may not be as chic as renewable energy, it certainly has its merits over coal or petroleum.

Natural gas is plentiful and the cleanest, most efficient fossil fuel. The combustion of natural gas emits almost 30 percent less carbon dioxide than oil and 40 percent less than coal.

More importantly, it's the most viable way we have to reduce our dependence on foreign oil in the near term. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration's Annual Energy Review, 98 percent of the natural gas used in the United States comes from North America — and Colorado ranks as one of the most productive states for natural-gas development.

Natural gas offers an immediate solution — what many, including President Barack Obama, are calling a "bridge fuel." Robert F. Kennedy Jr., senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council and president of the Waterkeeper Alliance, also has been vocal in his support of natural gas.

In a recent op-ed piece for The Huff-

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ington Post, he wrote, "America is awash in natural gas, which makes it possible to eliminate most of our dependence on deadly, destructive coal practically overnight — and without the expense of building new power plants."

I don't doubt the sincerity and good intentions of those committed to greater utilization of renewable-energy sources. It's undeniably a worthy goal. But it will be generations before we're able to produce even 10 percent of the energy we need from renewable sources.

I'm often asked to speak at colleges and universities to students who are graduating into the workforce, eager to make a difference in the energy field. They deserve to know what opportunities exist for them — not what we wish existed. Misrepresenting the job landscape does a disservice to everyone working toward a sustainable future — and to the reality of achieving that.

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