

Renewable energy industry hammered by job losses

By [David Abel](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 25, 2020, 7:10 p.m.



In Massachusetts, which ranks eighth in the nation with nearly 2,800 megawatts of solar power installed, the losses to the industry have been steep. NANCY PALMIERI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

In a setback for efforts to reduce carbon emissions, the long list of the newly unemployed includes solar technicians, HVAC contractors, and a legion of others hired in recent years to build renewable energy projects and install efficient appliances.

About 600,000 clean energy workers in the United States have lost their jobs since the pandemic took hold in March, including more than 21,000 positions in Massachusetts, according to an analysis of unemployment data by a research firm in Wrentham.

That amounts to a 17 percent loss of the 3.4 million Americans who worked in what had been a rapidly growing field, according to the report. And the layoffs are expected to mount in the coming months, with a total of as many as 850,000 clean energy workers likely to lose their jobs by the end of June, researchers found.

“Without decisive action, I see many of the temporary layoffs becoming permanent,” said Philip Jordan, vice president of BW Research, which produced the report.

With a range of tax credits expiring over the coming year, fewer consumers able to afford upgrades, and government coffers drained, clean energy jobs are “at significant risk for much more painful and protracted recoveries,” he said.

“A lot of the work requires being in the home and in contact with residents, and the nature of the virus makes that challenging,” Jordan added. “The accompanying economic decline then hits consumer spending, and things like home renovations and new construction fall, further lengthening any recovery.”

A recent report by the International Energy Agency projected that energy demand is likely to fall 6 percent in 2020 — seven times the decline after the

global financial crisis in 2008. The unprecedented decline is equivalent to all the energy demand of India, the world's third-largest energy consumer.

That lack of demand has hit the energy industry hard.

Until March, the solar industry was expanding, employing 250,000 workers and expecting to hire another 50,000 this year, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, a trade group based in Washington, D.C. The group had projected that some \$25 billion would be spent this year on installing nearly 20 gigawatts of electricity, enough to power more than two million homes.

“In February, I would have told you 2020 was on track to be our biggest year on record,” said Abigail Ross Hopper, president of the association, which has had to furlough 16 percent of its staff. “That outlook has changed dramatically.”

In the past two months, the solar industry has lost about 65,000 jobs, and is likely to lose more in coming months, reducing the overall number of workers by nearly 40 percent. Despite a strong first quarter, they expect new solar installations will decline by about a third from projections.

In Massachusetts, which ranks eighth in the nation with nearly 2,800 megawatts of solar power installed, the losses to the industry have been steep.

More than half of the 8,200 people employed in the field have lost their jobs since March, one of the highest tolls in the country, the report found. The

state is also likely to lose about two-thirds of the solar projects that companies planned to install this year.

With important tax credits phasing out or becoming less lucrative, the fallout could be greater. “I have some concern our forecasts are optimistic,” Ross Hopper said.

The wind industry is facing similar pressures. Nationally, companies expect to lose an estimated 35,000 jobs this year, with projects amounting to about 25 gigawatts of power at risk of being cancelled or postponed, according to the American Wind Energy Association, another industry trade group in Washington, D.C.

It’s unclear how many wind jobs and projects are in jeopardy in Massachusetts.

The wind energy industry, too, is asking lawmakers to extend tax incentives that many developers could lose if their projects are delayed.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is harming the wind industry’s ability to build the wind farms envisioned by congressional legislation,” said Tom Kiernan, the association’s CEO.

Environmental advocates in Massachusetts worry that the downturn might jeopardize the state’s ambitious goals of reducing carbon emissions.

Last month, amid the pandemic, Governor Charlie Baker announced a legally binding target of reducing the state’s net emissions to zero by 2050.

The state plans to cut emissions by at least 85 percent, with the rest offset by the amount absorbed by trees, wetlands, and other so-called carbon sinks.

Those reductions will require extensive amounts of renewable energy.

“The loss of these jobs today is a significant blow to not only those who have lost their income, but to the Commonwealth’s clean energy goals,” said Jack Clarke, director of public policy at Mass Audubon.

Bradley Campbell, president of the Conservation Law Foundation, noted that renewable energy has now surpassed coal as a source of energy in the United States.

“As public officials at every level consider needs for COVID relief and recovery, this sector should be both an economic and environmental priority,” he said.

State environmental officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Peter Rothstein, president of the Northeast Clean Energy Council trade group, said the losses go beyond wind and solar. Many workers who install insulation and low-energy lighting, or manufacture energy-efficient products, have seen their jobs vanish.

The immediate economic pain, however, shouldn’t obscure the long-term consequences, he said.

“Bringing clean energy back to work is a critical priority for the economy and the environment,” Rothstein said. “We need a road map to get back on

track.”

David Abel can be reached at david.abel@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@davabel](https://twitter.com/davabel).

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