Are green jobs in Oregon, or aren’t they?

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By Lisa Cohn

Government funding for green energy projects is an emotional topic across the country these days, and Oregon, generally recognized as a top “green” state, is no exception.

In early October, Willamette Week, a weekly newspaper in Portland, ran a story, "Outgreened and Uncounted," that prompted strong feelings in renewable energy advocates in the state.

The paper examined reports about projects funded by federal stimulus money, and concluded that few green jobs have been created or saved as a result of those investments. Oregon only has 845 jobs in solar, wind and geothermal energy, the Willamette Week story said. The article was based in part on information from a Brookings Institution study.

All wrong, retorted Erin Greeson, a spokeswoman for the regional environmental advocacy group Renewable Northwest Project, who has asked Willamette Week to print a clarification.

The state has many more green jobs than reported by the newspaper, she says. What’s more, she added, such reports cast a shadow on a true success story in the state.

So is Oregon’s much-touted green economy a success or a failure? Were all those stimulus dollars wasted?

As it turns out, Brookings goofed up when it reported the numbers, partially because the green-jobs numbers are changing so quickly.

Jonathan Rockwell, a senior research analyst at Brookings, says the state has more green jobs than what Brookings reported. In fact, Brookings plans to update the numbers soon. The report in question was based on a Dun & Bradstreet database of every company in the U.S., which didn’t give the whole picture, he says.

When Oregon officials contacted Brookings and shared their own data, especially about new solar and wind companies in Portland, Rockwell took a second look at the report’s numbers.

“It turned out that Dun & Bradstreet hadn’t collected data on these companies probably because they were so new and hadn’t made it into the database,” he says.

“This is the challenge you face with a sector that’s growing rapidly,” Rockwell says. “There are companies born between the time we collect the data and publish it.”

One of the most glaring pieces of inaccurate information was Brookings’ report that Iberdrola SA subsidiary Iberdrola Renewables Inc., which is headquartered in Portland, and SolarWorld, the Oregon-based affiliate of German solar company SolarWorld AG, created fewer than five jobs in Oregon, Greeson says. Portland Development Commission data shows that Iberdrola has 400 employees and SolarWorld employs 1,050.

“PDC numbers indicate 1,790 solar manufacturing and 1,199 wind energy jobs alone, not counting supply chain and support businesses,” she says.

But the Oregon green energy story is about more than just jobs. Earlier in the year, Renewable Northwest projected that capital investment in Oregon wind, solar and geothermal will be more than $5.4 billion this year.

In rural Sherman County, for example, wind farms have generated more than $17 million in property taxes and investments in the county, Renewable Northwest says. For the county, that money helps pay for fire departments, health services, new supplies for students and public-building construction projects.

In fact, in Sherman County, officials just announced that they’re sending every county resident a $590 check. That’s their share of wind energy revenues, and this is the third year they’ll get such checks.

The moral to the story, in some ways, is that the government’s investments in clean energy can’t be measured solely in jobs. At the same time, it’s important to track just how effective such investments are.

Clearly, that’s not easy. It’s likely the emotional roller coaster will continue.

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