

# Obama Visit Highlights Nevada's Green Jobs Plan

Cristina Silva, Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Nevada is betting big on renewable energy. With the highest jobless rate in the nation, this Western state long dependent on tourism dollars is courting geothermal, solar and wind projects to broaden its economy.

President Barack Obama hopes to capitalize on the state's all-in attitude toward green energy when he stops in southern Nevada on Wednesday to discuss his energy plan at Copper Mountain Solar 1 Facility, the largest photovoltaic solar power plant in the nation.

The visit comes as some Nevada officials are beginning to question whether so-called green jobs are really the best solution to one of the nation's most troubled economies. By all accounts, the state's growing renewable energy sector is generating few long-term jobs. A generous tax incentive program means local governments are getting less revenue than first promised. The city of Reno recently deemed its wind project an energy savings failure.

In many ways, Nevada is a testing ground for the nation's renewable energy policies. Clean energy tax incentives debated by Congress have long received support from Republicans and Democrats in Nevada eager to create jobs and encourage innovation. The expansive, sun-scorched state has the most geothermal projects under development in the nation and is ranked third for utility-scale solar capacity.

Proponents argue Nevada's investment in renewable energy has no downsides. They say geothermal, solar and wind companies create work for plumbers, engineers, electricians, tax attorneys, contract lawyers, project managers and other blue and white collar professionals in a state that has led the nation in unemployment for years. Nevada's green jobs are also helping make the country safer and cleaner, supporters said.

"Clean energy is the future," said Karl Gawell, executive director of the Geothermal Energy Association, a lobbying group that touts Nevada as a national model for renewable energy development.

Critics warn the rush to harness the power of Nevada's sun, wind and natural heat could be setting the stage for another bubble that will leave the state's jobs market no better off than it is today.

"We don't want boom and bust," said Brad Goetsch, manager of Churchill County, a hotbed of geothermal production. "We don't want to open 50 plants next year and then have nothing happen in the future."

After years of dangling carrots in front of renewable energy companies, state

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

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officials recently began to analyze whether the incentives being offered are too generous.

"That's what I am looking at — how sustainable are the jobs in this industry," said Stacey Crowley, director of the state's energy office.

Nevada's first geothermal power plant was developed in 1984. Nearly three decades later, there were roughly 65 geothermal projects in development in the state and 26 more prospective geothermal production sites had been identified in 2011. Altogether, that means Nevada has more geothermal projects than any other state, and more than twice the plants of second-place California.

Solar and wind projects are also expanding in the state. Many of the projects are being built on public land.

"These projects and others under way will contribute more than \$1 billion in financial benefits and more than 2,200 jobs to Nevada," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid claimed in an opinion piece he wrote for the Las Vegas Sun ahead of Obama's visit this week.

Located in central Nevada, rural Churchill County offers a glimpse into two sides of the state's energy policies. There are seven operating geothermal plants, three in permitting and seven more proposed. There is a solar plant and another one in permitting. The county produces 10 times the energy it uses, Goetsch said.

But Churchill gets to keep few of the tax dollars that were initially promised. What's harder to swallow is that not all of the jobs are going to Nevada workers. Goetsch said the companies told him that they hired some workers from other states who were better equipped to complete the risky drilling needed to open a geothermal plant. After construction, the automated plants only need a few workers to stay open.

"It hasn't been what we were promised," Goetsch said.

In northern Nevada, the city of Reno used \$420,000 in federal stimulus dollars to purchase nine wind turbines. Nearly two years after most of the turbines were installed, city officials recently calculated an energy savings of roughly \$3,000 a year. At that pace, it will take Reno roughly 140 years to recoup its investment.

In Boulder City, where Obama is slated to discuss his energy solutions on Wednesday, the city has 8,000 acres of renewable projects under contract and hopes to recover \$12 million annually from those deals through the next 50 years. If realized, that figure would represent nearly half of the city's \$26 million budget.

Copper Mountain Solar 1 Facility created about 350 construction jobs, but only 10 full-time positions.

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