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Can clean energy help plug the hole in the oil patch? 'The transition is well underway,' says advocate

Over 230,000 Texans work in energy efficiency and solar, wind and nuclear power. That sector is holding up better than oil and gas.



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Vistra Corp., the state's largest power generator, is expanding its solar plant in Upton County, Texas. Over the next two years, Vistra plans to invest \$850 million in solar power and batteries in Texas, and many others want to build green energy here, too. (Vistra)



By [Mitchell Schnurman](#)

6:00 AM on Nov 3, 2020 CST

Last week, Exxon Mobil said it would eliminate **about 14,000 jobs**, including 1,900 in the U.S.

That follows big layoffs at Shell, BP, Chevron, Schlumberger and more in what a consulting firm described as a "**great compression.**"

Texas is feeling it in a big way: 1 in 4 oil and gas jobs have disappeared in the past 12 months, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The industry had been suffering from high supplies and low prices, and the pandemic made everything worse by hobbling the economy and depressing demand even more.

But outside the oil patch, there are some promising trends in energy. In Texas and elsewhere, investors have been making big bets on solar and wind power, storage batteries, energy efficiency and the like.

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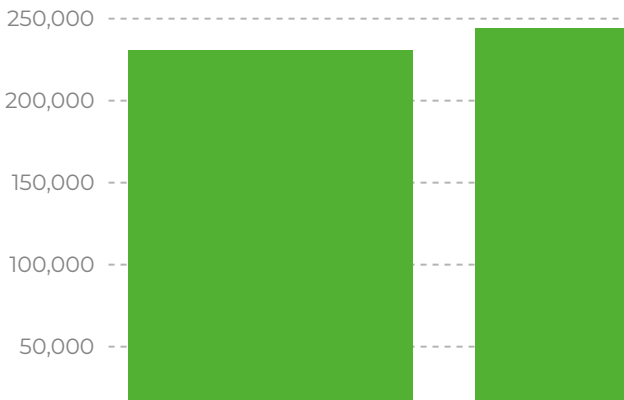


This so-called **advanced energy** sector had been growing jobs at twice the rate of the Texas labor market -- at least before the pandemic.

Over 230,000 Texans were working in advanced energy this summer, according to industry estimates. That's more workers than in real estate, trucking and grocery stores in the state.

Advanced energy jobs in Texas

Texas jobs in energy efficiency, demand response, energy storage, natural gas electric generation, solar, wind, hydro, nuclear, electric vehicles, biofuels and the smart grid.



Solar, wind and storage also account for the vast majority of proposed **projects in the pipeline** at ERCOT, the grid serving most of Texas.

"The trend is clear," said **Suzanne Bertin**, managing director of the **Texas Advanced Energy Business Alliance**.

"Investors are putting their money behind

wind, solar and storage. And more customers, especially corporate buyers, are demanding these technologies.

“The transition is well underway,” she said, referring to the shift toward cleaner energy.

In 2009, wind accounted for 6% of electricity used on ERCOT. Last year, that share was 20%. Over the same time, coal’s portion of electricity generation fell by almost half.

In the past decade, wind capacity in Texas surged from 9,000 megawatts to almost 24,000 MW. That’s enough to power almost 5 million homes during peak demand.

Texas easily **leads all states in wind power** with roughly three times more capacity than Iowa and Oklahoma in 2018, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

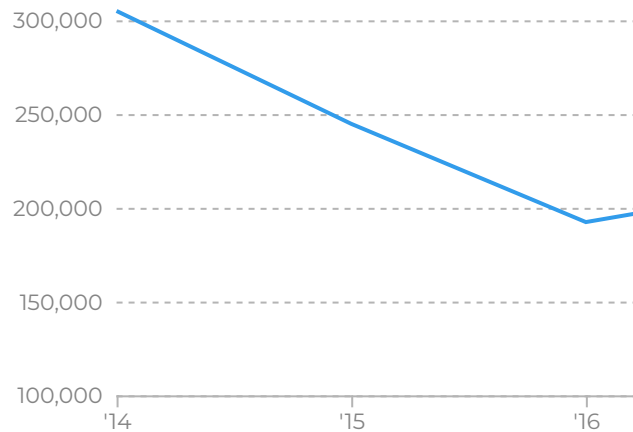
Texas **ranks 4th in solar capacity**, and it’s coming on fast. In the first half of 2020, Texas **added more solar** than any state, said the Solar Energy Industries Association.

Lots of storage batteries are also in the Texas pipeline, and their potential capacity far exceeds the proposals for new natural

gas plants. Bertin calls storage a game-changer because it helps fill the gaps when wind and solar power are unreliable.

Oil and gas jobs in Texas

Texas jobs in oil and gas extraction and mining support activities in September:



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

The pandemic has had a major impact on the energy business, including renewables. By June, the solar industry had lost over 100,000 jobs nationwide, **erasing five years of gains**, according to the solar association.

In Texas, the advanced energy segment lost 24,000 jobs by July, Bertin said. That's a decline of 9.5%, but it's far smaller than the drop in oil and gas jobs. And Bertin believes advanced energy can help drive the state's economic recovery.

She pointed to **Tesla's new \$1.1 billion factory** under construction in Austin.

Tesla will build electric vehicles and batteries and create at least 5,000 jobs.

Many other companies, especially in manufacturing, are drawn to Texas because it generates so much clean energy — and has more coming. Most Fortune 500 companies have adopted sustainability goals, and Texas often can provide 100% of their power from renewable sources.

“This is an opportunity for Texas to really continue its energy leadership,” Bertin said. “By investing more in advanced energy, we’ll be able to bring manufacturing to the state and export those technologies beyond Texas.”

Last year, corporations in the U.S. bought 13 gigawatts of electricity through power purchase agreements. That shattered the previous year’s record with Texas being the primary beneficiary, according to the **2020 Sustainable Energy in America Factbook**.

“Companies are flocking to the Texas power market,” said the book, which is researched and produced by BloombergNEF.

Texas generators landed 40% of the purchase contracts last year, over twice the share of the **PJM** grid, which serves over a

dozen states from Illinois to North Carolina. Nearly two thirds of the Texas deals were for solar power.

Top segments in advanced energy

Number of Texans working in these advanced energy segments in 2019:

Energy efficiency (EnergyStar products, lighting, HVAC)

Electricity generation (solar, wind, natural gas, nuclear)

48,800

Vehicles (hybrid, electric, natural gas, fuel-cell)

17,300

Advanced grid and storage (batteries, microgrids, etc.)

13,200

Texas has long been the nation's largest producer of oil and gas, and the fracking revolution has driven production to new heights. But when lawmakers deregulated the electricity market in 1999, they also wanted to encourage renewable energy.

They set some modest minimum production goals and later boosted them, and Texas generators still blew past the mandates 15 years early. Texas became the leader in wind power, and now solar and batteries are on the rise.

Vistra Corp., the state's largest power generator, recently announced plans to **invest \$850 million in seven solar and storage projects in Texas.**

"This is the perfect state to be doing all that," said **Bruce Bullock**, director of the Maguire Energy Institute at Southern Methodist University. "Texas has the renewable resources with the sun and wind. We have the natural gas plants to back 'em up. We have plenty of land for batteries. And we have the transmission infrastructure to carry the power."

There's also a lot of interest from potential workers. In energy courses at SMU, students must evaluate solutions with both renewables and fossil fuels, he said. And they're often enthusiastic about clean energy and companies like Vistra.

"They're not just interested in Exxon Mobil and Chevron," he said.

That's good, especially when those companies are shrinking.



ENERGY

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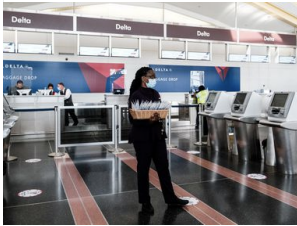
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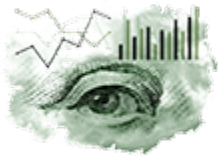
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