

**Farming: The Original ‘Green Collar Job’**

*By Stewart Truelsen*

As the economy loses blue collar and white collar jobs, one bright spot in the employment outlook appears to be so-called “green collar jobs.” But what exactly are green collar jobs?

Vice President Joe Biden described green collar jobs this way: “They provide products and services that use renewable energy sources, reduce pollution, and conserve energy and natural resources.” Biden did not say this, but by his definition farming is a green collar job. In fact, farming is the original green collar job.

Farmers were among the original users of renewable energy to provide products and services. Early agriculturalists relied on solar power to grow crops just as we do today. They used wind power to draw water and grind grain into flour. They built irrigation systems to make more efficient use of the water.

Yet, the term “green collar jobs” was unheard of until recently. It was first used as the title of a book 10 years ago, but there were references to green collar workers prior to that. It became part of everyday vocabulary during the last presidential campaign when the candidates, particularly President Barack Obama, talked about creating millions of green collar jobs.

There already were millions of green collar jobs a hundred years ago, but the rise in agricultural productivity made many of those farmers unnecessary. They went to the cities and took blue collar jobs in manufacturing. As manufacturing jobs moved overseas in more recent times, white collar and service sector jobs replaced some of that employment.

The farmers who stayed on the land built American agriculture into the unparalleled success it is today. They don’t get enough credit for their green collar accomplishments over the years.

Before there was an environmental movement, farmers were learning and adopting soil and water conservation measures. It was a painful lesson taught by the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. During the Great Depression, the American Farm Bureau Federation and others encouraged research into ethanol from corn and a variety of other crops and crop residues. They were decades ahead of the times, but again in the 1970s Farm Bureau revived its push for renewable fuels.

AFBF and state Farm Bureaus also were leaders in conservation tillage, well-water testing and many other environmental improvements of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. And just as they were with ethanol, farmers were early adopters of modern wind energy and the use of methane from manure to generate electricity.

The green collar economy is really not a new thing for farmers or even for this country in times of economic trouble. President Franklin Roosevelt had a similar idea with the Civilian Conservation Corps. It’s just a little more high-tech this time around — installing solar panels, weatherizing homes, building a new power grid and hybrid cars.

Long after the current excitement about the green economy has worn off, American farmers and ranchers will remain green collar workers as they always have been — efficient producers of food, fiber and fuel, and stewards of natural resources.