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Ontario Energy Act can create jobs; Hamilton could benefit from good green goals

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Illustrations: Photo: Mathew Sumner, the Associated Press / Green energy infrastructure in Ontario could mean new jobs in solar and other forms of renewable energy. ;

Governments have an opportunity now to achieve three important goals at once: stimulate the economy, cut carbon emissions and create a new generation of manufacturing jobs.

The key is a commitment to strong legislation that ensures the sweeping technological and economic changes needed globally to hold off disastrous global warming are turned to the benefit of Ontario and Hamilton, rather than furthering job loss and decay, as some fear.

Our organizations -- Environmental Defence and the United Steelworkers -- have formed an alliance in Canada, Blue Green Canada, to bridge the gap between environment and the economy and jobs, promoting environmental excellence and a strong economy at the same time. Based on the experiences of our colleagues in the United States, a blue-green alliance can play an important role in moving forward a green recovery.

Ontario's Green Energy Act could be the opportunity Ontario has been waiting for. By guaranteeing a price for renewable sources of energy, the legislation provides strong incentives for building wind, solar and other facilities. If balanced with effective local sourcing requirements and incentives, the production and building of green energy can create jobs and benefit our economy as well as the climate.

A recent report published by a leading U.S. expert from the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, predicts that investments made as part of the new Green Energy Act could create as many as 90,000 jobs a year in Ontario. These would be good, high-paying jobs in everything from construction to manufacturing and from accounting to research.

Job creation should be top of everyone's mind these days. The loss of manufacturing jobs is devastating many Ontario communities, including Hamilton. Along with programs to support the replacement of toxic chemicals and improved recycling of waste, the demand for green energy stimulates the Ontario economy to build the new equipment needed to power the global energy revolution currently under way.

These initiatives have great support from the public. A recent poll found that 87 per cent of Ontario residents supported the Green Energy Act, with widespread support across rural and urban Ontario. The two most popular reasons for supporting the

Green Energy Act: reducing greenhouse gasses and the creation of good green jobs. A full 78 per cent of respondents expected a positive impact on Ontario's job market. The public clearly has a handle on the change that needs to take place and the investments that need to be made to improve our economic position.

Today's economic crisis does not need a "quick fix" to restore the status quo. The Green Energy Act is part of a long-term solution, but one that must start immediately because there is no time to lose.

The jobs that have been created in Germany and Spain from renewable energy technologies were anchored to a strong procurement policy and guaranteed rates for renewable sources of energy. The policy changes Ontario has proposed under the Green Energy Act could have a large, positive job impact if coupled with a strong local procurement policy that ensures we are letting our workers build Ontario's energy future.

To date, European and other manufacturers have a head start in developing the cutting-edge technologies and enjoying the job benefits that come from exporting windmills, solar panels and the like into Canada. With the Obama administration in the United States now developing a large-scale stimulus package built around green infrastructure, Canada and Ontario face the serious danger of falling further behind.

The next two months will be critical. If the Green Energy Act lives up to expectations, Ontario has a chance to get ahead of the renewable energy wave and make Ontario a leader. Hamilton could be part of that new wave.

If it is sidelined by short-sighted thinking or restricted by weak regulations and policies, Ontario will fall behind other regions and lose the advantage.

We are committed to working together to make sure Ontario is ahead of the game.

Ken Neumann is national director of the United Steelworkers, which represents 250,000 workers across Canada. Rick Smith is executive director of Environmental Defence, a national organization.

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