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## Energy and the Bleak West Slope Economy

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**Editor's Note: The West Slope economy continues to suffer from high unemployment and too few jobs. Since the double whammy of 2009 when oil and gas operations hit a downturn and the economic recession hardened, Grand Junction, the largest city in the region has experienced the dubious distinction of hitting a number of economic "worsts."**

**A stark fact: out-of-work oil and gas workers who used to make \$70,000 to \$90,000 a year, are now face to face with an average annual wage in Mesa County of \$36,400.**

It isn't all bad news in Western Colorado, however. Below is an opinion piece offered by the *Post Independent* (Glenwood Springs) Editorial Board that emphasizes the positive contribution clean energy has brought to Garfield County. While the number of jobs being created by this surge can't come close to matching the oil and gas industry in its heyday, those that are being created would be nonexistent if the county hadn't become a welcoming partner. And there is hope that down the road the projects will lead to more employment.

Residents can be proud that Garfield County has become a hotbed for clean energy development. Three projects are under way in the Rifle area, two involving renewable energy and a third that will use our cleanest fossil fuel to build energy security.

The Clean Energy Collective is building a community-owned solar array at the Garfield County Regional Airport. Not far away on Airport Road, Colorado Mountain College is running a biofuel plant to test crops and processing systems.

And in downtown Rifle, gasoline dealer Kirk Swallow is opening the county's first compressed natural gas fueling station at his Shell station at First and Railroad Avenue.

The airport solar array is the collective's second array, following one built last year at El Jebel. Residential and business customers of Holy Cross Energy can invest in clean solar electricity, whether they rent or own their property.

Hats off to Garfield County for helping make this expansion of community-owned solar work. It's an elegant idea that we'd like to see other electric utilities offer to their customers.

The biofuel project is in research and development, under the guidance of CMC scientist Jon Prater. Partners in the project are testing processing systems to convert high-yield, low-maintenance crops into a fuel — butanol — that can power conventional gasoline engines.

CMC and its partners in the Western Colorado Carbon Neutral Bioenergy Consortium are in a five-year testing program in Garfield and Mesa counties to determine the best crops to use, with an eye towards no-till crops that conserve soil.

Biofuel crops provide new crop options on lands that are now marginal, and biofuel byproducts — the leftover chunks of plant fiber — can be burned in pellet stoves.

Meanwhile, the compressed natural gas (CNG) fueling station opening in Rifle, along with a facility opening this weekend in Grand Junction, are filling the gap in CNG fueling

options for local fleets and for motorists traveling between the Denver area and Utah, where CNG stations are plentiful.

Vehicles need mechanical conversions and added tanks to run on CNG, but the fuel emits less carbon dioxide and other pollutants than gasoline. More importantly, it can be purchased from U.S. gas producers — including those in Garfield County — instead of foreign oil exporters.

Developing CNG fueling stations, which doesn't come cheap, is dependent on commitments from local fleet owners to buy the fuel. Again, hats off to Garfield County for committing to buy or convert a dozen trucks in its fleet to run on CNG.

All three of these projects show that Garfield County leaders, businesses and scientists are working toward energy security and developing clean energy sources that will protect our climate and environment.

*And, let's hope, create more jobs!*

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