

# Robinson renewable energy firm, others, face uncertain futures

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Joe Morinville's business in Robinson is having its busiest year ever and he could use five to seven more people to handle all the work.

But he doesn't plan to hire anyone.

These are uncertain times for his solar energy company, Energy Independent Solutions, and many others in the renewable power industry. In the midst of unprecedented growth, there are signs of a slowdown. Many of the government programs — grants, loans and tax credits — that spurred the growth are either done or on shifting ground, making private investors like Morinville skittish.

“It absolutely handcuffs my growth. I want to grow my business, we want to invest, we want to hire more people,” Morinville, 45, of Robinson said. “But in order to make a venture like that, you have to have some kind of foresight. ... If there isn't a stable (government) policy going into the future, small-business men are afraid to hire people.”

In part because of the same fears nationwide, private sector investment in clean energy dropped 37 percent from 2011 to 2012 to \$35.6 billion, according to a report released Wednesday by the Pew Charitable Trusts and Bloomberg. China, second in 2011, surpassed the United States as No. 1 in the world with \$65.1 billion of investment, leading the world in solar, wind and other renewables.

National leaders should see the development of renewable energy technology as an opportunity for exporting American-made goods, said Phyllis Cuttino, director of Pew's Clean Energy Program in

Washington. China used tariffs, guaranteed purchases and mandates for renewable energy to encourage private investment, and the United States needs a wide-ranging energy policy to compete, she said.

Shifting government policies are “just tough on the market,” said Ethan Zindler, head of policy at Bloomberg New Energy Finance. “It's not any way to build a manufacturing sector in a country if you have people constantly questioning whether your policy is going to expire.”

In Pennsylvania, Gov. Tom Corbett has tried to foster certainty, said Patrick Henderson, Corbett's energy executive. He's committed to keeping pre-existing mandates that require more renewable power use in the state and won't change them, Henderson said. And he won't be passing new tax credits or incentives in favor of renewable power, either.

“What was persuasive to policymakers four, five, six years ago, well, we've seen the applecart turned upside down by natural gas,” Henderson said, noting that natural gas has some of the same appeal as renewables, coming from domestic sources and burning with less air pollution. “I think it's time for all of them to stand (and compete) on their own.”

That could lead to a lost opportunity for Pennsylvania because of the global competition, say advocates for renewable power.

EverPower Wind Holdings Inc., a New York company that has now moved nearly all of its 60 workers to the Strip District, wants to keep expanding in the United States, preferably in Pennsylvania, Ohio or West Virginia, said Dhaval Bhalodia, who moved from Albany to become EverPower's operations manager. But if investment picks up abroad instead of in the United States, eventually that's where the growth will happen, he added.

“There's quite a bit of capital looking for investment in renewable energy,” said Mike Speerschneider, the company's senior director of government affairs and permitting. “What's really the difficult thing is really the political environment. ... The off-again-on-again policy really creates difficulty for investors.