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If green-collar jobs are the wave of the future, Congressman Harry Mitchell wants Arizona to be first in line for the benefits of that budding industry.

On Thursday, Mitchell, a Democrat, toured two Tempe-base [Save](#) d businesses that market solar energy locally and internationally and a Tempe bus-operations center that is recognized for its environmentally conscious construction.

Mitchell visited with business leaders and city officials to get a better understanding of Arizona's potential as a green-industry leader and how stimulus funding and future legislation has and can continue to speed that role.

"This (stimulus) money is supposed to help create jobs," he said.

"I want to get an idea of whether that is happening. I think it is obvious from these (businesses) that it is."

The energy provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act are being touted as the source of about 500,000 jobs. Portions of the funding are targeted at increasing the nation's renewable-energy production and making public buildings more energy efficient.

Larry Polizzotto, vice president of First Solar's investor relations, schooled Mitchell on the Tempe company's solar-panel technology and skyrocketing growth.

Since First Solar opened in 2002, it has grown from 200 employees to 4,000. About 1,000 of those employees are in the U.S. The company has a plant in Germany, which has become an

international leader in the wind-and-solar energy industry. Germany's second-largest export is wind turbines, and it exports nearly half of the world's solar panels.

While incentives for renewable energy have prompted Germany's transition, Polizzotto told Mitchell that the U.S. market also has expanded. From 2003 to March 2009, First Solar produced and installed 1 gigawatt of solar electricity. The company expects to produce 1.1 gigawatts of solar power in the coming year alone.

"What's happened to the solar market here in the U.S. in just one year is really just remarkable," Mitchell said.

First Solar is working with California utilities to install its panels in open fields and on top of buildings to increase the state's sources of renewable energy.

Kathy Weiss, First Solar's vice president of government affairs, said that Arizona's sunlight could be harvested into a gold mine for the state.

"As renewable energy becomes a larger industry for the U.S. . . . you'd be able to generate that energy here and sell it on the West Coast," she said. "That would be an economic (driver) for Arizona."

At American Solar Electric, a Tempe-based business that markets its solar panels primarily to businesses and the residential market, Sean Seitz, American Solar's co-owner and president, told Mitchell that his business is also growing.

Seitz boasted of a partnership with Shea Homes to include solar-power systems in some housing developments. At Arizona Shea Trilogy communities in Peoria, Queen Creek and Pinal County, solar-power systems are included as a standard feature on about 50 homes. The company has installed at least 1,000 solar-electric systems throughout the state.

Seitz said that the demand for solar power is growing in the Southwest as the public begins to better understand the technology's environmental and economic benefits.

American Solar attributes some of the increased demand for solar power to federal legislation passed last year.

The Solar Investment Tax Credit allows a credit of 30 percent of qualified expenses for a solar-electric system. The credit was capped at \$2,000.

"It's really become affordable," Seitz said. "We're hiring more workers to handle that demand."

At Tempe's East Valley Bus Operations and Maintenance facility, Mitchell saw the federal funding the city invested in the center, which services Tempe, Phoenix and Scottsdale buses. The facility uses alternative fuel for its buses, low-flow plumbing fixtures and waterless urinals to save 168,000 gallons of water annually. It also uses natural light in most of its office space.

Tempe is using \$6.5 million in stimulus funds to improve the facility, expanding the parking area with shade canopies topped with solar panels and upgrading the alternative-fueling capacity.