

**PROTECTORS** BIOLOGISTS IN CALIFORNIA ENSURE NO ANIMALS ARE HARMED IN THE MAKING OF A SOLAR PLANT.

## Hottest Tech Job in America?

Giant solar plants are being built where dozens of protected species live. That's good news for wildlife biologists. **By Todd Woody**

**IT LOOKS LIKE A SCENE** from an old episode of *The X-Files*: As a red-tailed hawk circles overhead and a wild pronghorn sheep grazes in the distance, a dozen people in dark sunglasses move methodically through a vast field of golden barley, eyes fixed to the ground, GPS devices in hand. They're searching for bodies.

In this case, however, the bodies belong to the endangered blunt-nosed leopard lizard, and the crew moving through the knee-high grain are wildlife biologists hired by Ausra, a Silicon Valley startup that's building a solar power plant for utility PG&E on this square mile of central California ranchland.

With scores of solar power stations planned for sites in the Southwest, demand for wildlife biologists is hot. They're needed to look for lizards and other threatened fauna and flora, to draw up habitat-protection plans, and to comply with endangered-species laws to ensure that a desert tortoise or a kit fox won't be inadvertently squashed by a solar array.

That has engineering giants like URS in San Francisco scrambling to hire biologists to serve their burgeoning roster of solar clients. "It's a good time to be a biologist—it's never been busier in my 15 years in the business," says Angela Leiba, a senior project manager for URS, which is staffing the \$550 million Ausra project. URS has brought onboard 40 biologists since 2007 to keep up with the solar boom. Salaries in the industry, which typically



start around \$30,000 and run up to about \$120,000, have spiked 15% to 20% over the past year.

The work is labor-intensive. It can take a 30- to 50-person team several weeks to complete just one wildlife survey. "The biologists are critical to move these projects forward," says COO Bruce Osborn of Stirling Energy Systems, which is planting 12,000 solar dishes in the desert. For one project Stirling had to pay for two years' worth of wildlife

surveys before satisfying regulators.

PG&E renewable-energy executive Hal La Flash worries that universities aren't cranking out enough workers of all stripes for the green economy. "It could really slow down some of these big solar projects," he says. Osborn can vouch for that: Biological work on the Stirling project has ground to a halt at times while the company waits for its consultants to finish up surveys on competitors' sites. ■