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Tennessee aims to lead the nuclear energy boom | Opinion

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Key Points

A recent Oak Ridge summit addressed the growing demand for skilled trades workers in the nuclear energy sector.

Tennessee is positioned to be a national leader in nuclear power due to its existing assets and partnerships.

Apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeship programs, and recruiting veterans are key strategies for workforce development.

Leaders from industry, government, education, labor unions, economic development organizations and community support partners gathered at ORAU recently for the [Pathway to Trades Summit](#) to address one of the region’s most pressing challenges and greatest opportunities: developing the skilled trades workforce needed to support the rapid expansion of nuclear energy, and related industries.

The nuclear industry is entering a period of historic growth driven by administration priorities, expansion of nuclear power capacity, advanced reactor development, infrastructure modernization, national security needs and increased demand for reliable, carbon-free energy. This growth is expected to create significant workforce demand, especially in the skilled trades. The workforce challenge is immediate and long term.

The summit focused on identifying workforce needs, highlighting successful partnerships and programs, addressing barriers to employment, and strengthening coordination across sectors to ensure Tennessee is prepared to meet growing demand over the next decade and beyond. Outcomes of the summit included new conversations, partnerships, and a long list of action items to continue the momentum.

Workforce development is no longer the responsibility of any one institution. Long-term success will require coordinated collaboration among employers, educators, unions, workforce agencies, policymakers and community organizations.

Tennessee is positioned as a national leader in nuclear power

Tennessee’s existing assets create a strong foundation for leadership in the nuclear workforce space, including ORAU, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Y-12 National Security Complex, Tennessee Valley Authority, strong union apprenticeship structure, community colleges and universities, and workforce and economic development partnerships. [TNWorks](#) helps connect these stakeholders across the

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Apprenticeships in skilled trades are critical

Registered apprenticeships are vital to meet increasing workforce demand for skilled trades. Apprenticeships provide direct pathways into high-wage careers, and skilled trades should be viewed as premier career opportunities. Employers and educators must continue elevating awareness of skilled trades careers.

Successful pre-apprenticeship and career awareness programs are vital. Two examples are the pre-apprenticeship program at Roane County Schools and the [East Tennessee Apprenticeship Readiness Program \(ETARP\)](#), a collaboration between the Cooperative Agreement of Labor and Management and Roane State Community College's Oak Ridge campus. These initiatives expose students to skilled trades careers, technical education pathways, nuclear opportunities, and hands-on learning experiences – and more are needed.

Veterans represent a valuable talent pipeline

Programs like [SkillBridge](#) can connect veterans to nuclear careers. Veterans often bring technical experience, leadership skills, strong safety culture awareness, mission-driven work ethic, and security clearance eligibility.

Nontechnical barriers such as lack of child care or transportation can prevent individuals from entering or remaining in workforce training programs or even in the workforce. The current level of wraparound support services is inadequate. Improving these in a meaningful way will require tangible support and coordination from industry, union, government, and community support organizations.

Coordination across sectors is essential

Strong programs in support of nuclear workforce development exist, but coordination between every aspect of the ecosystem will be necessary for success.

The [Tennessee Nuclear Network \(TN²\)](#) is already working to strengthen alignment. Fragmented efforts cannot meet future demand.

The Pathway to Trades Summit demonstrated strong regional momentum around workforce development for the nuclear sector. East Tennessee has the expertise, partnerships and commitment necessary to help shape the future workforce that will power the nation's next generation of energy innovations.

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