

Oregon jobless aid payments fell by 90% in 2021

Despite fewer monthly payments, worker shortage persists

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon began 2021 paying out nearly \$600 million each month in unemployment assistance, providing aid to well over 200,000 people.

Monthly payments fell rapidly through the year, though, as the economy rebounded from the pandemic recession. Aid then plunged off a cliff in September when expanded federal benefits expired.

In December, the state paid just over \$60 million in benefits — only 10% of what it paid at the start of 2021, and only a little higher than benefits payments in the months before the pandemic.

In addition to the end of federal pandemic assistance, last year's record decline in unemployment aid reflects one of the strongest labor markets in Oregon history. The number of vacant jobs exceeds the number of unemployed workers.

The state added 107,000 jobs in 2021. That's far above the prior one-year record, which was 61,000.

And yet Oregon employers are still hunting for workers, and state economists say Oregon won't have recovered all the jobs it lost to the pandemic recession until next fall.

Expanded jobless assistance in 2020 and 2021 is one reason why, according to Gail Krumenauer, economist with the Oregon Employment Department. Federal pandemic aid paid as much as \$600 extra a week in jobless benefits in 2020, which meant that laid-off workers at the bottom of the pay scale were actually earning more than they did when they were working.

"They were getting, on average, full wage replacement," Krumenauer said.

Meanwhile, just about everyone received three rounds of stimulus payments during the pandemic, part of a broad federal aid package that spared many people from the pain of the steepest, deepest economic downturn in U.S. history.

"That did build up people's savings," Krumenauer said.

As a result, she said, some people have a financial buffer that's letting them take their time returning to work and be choosy about which jobs they'll take.

The worker shortage has pushed up wages as employers compete for labor and seek to lure workers back. The average private-sector job paid \$31.76 an hour in December, according to state data, up 15% since the pandemic started.

People who might have worked two jobs to make ends meet before the pandemic can now get by with one, Krumenauer said, which only makes the labor market tighter.

"That's a great condition for workers to be in," she said. "And it's more difficult for employers."

There are many other reasons Oregon employment hasn't returned to pre-pandemic levels. Child care remains in especially short supply, for example, and some prospective workers continue to choose to stay home because of COVID-19.

It's not likely that Oregon's job growth in 2022 will match last year's torrid pace. And with so few workers left on the unemployment rolls, Krumenauer said it's getting harder to match individual people to the skills required for the jobs available.

Still, she said that as the omicron spike in coronavirus cases fades and Oregonians draw down their savings from pandemic stimulus payments, more workers will likely be drawn back into the labor pool.

"It seems like if COVID can finally get under control after this and some of that cushion goes away," Krumenauer said, "then more people will start getting back to work."



Krumenauer



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife/Contributed Photo, File

A proposal to add \$1 million to a state fund that compensates farmers and ranchers who lose livestock to wolves drew criticism from conservation and animal rights advocates at February 2022 legislative hearing.

Proposal to increase spending on livestock killed by wolves garners opposing responses

By ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — A proposal to add \$1 million to a state fund that compensates farmers and ranchers who've lost livestock to wolves has drawn criticism from conservation and animal rights advocates who are asking legislators to oppose it.

House Bill 4127 would more than triple the amount of money in the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Wolf Depredation Compensation & Financial Assistance Fund. The Oregon Cattlemen's Association, Oregon Hunters Association, Oregon Sheep Growers Association and the Oregon Farm Bureau sought the extra funding on top of the \$400,000 budgeted for the program over the next two years.

The bill has only Republican support, with chief sponsors in Eastern Oregon — Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo; Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane; Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner; Sen. Bill

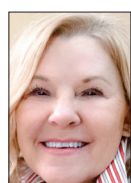
Hansell, R-Athena; and Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale.

Groups such as the Humane Society of the United States, the Oregon League of Conservation Voters, the Sierra Club Oregon Chapter and Oregon Wild say ranchers are getting compensated for cattle and sheep they cannot prove were killed by wolves, and that the program needs to be reviewed before more funding is awarded.

Haley Stewart, a program manager for wildlife protection at the Humane Society's Oregon chapter, testified at a legislative hearing on Wednesday, Feb. 9, that her group fears most of the new funding would go to claims for missing, not killed, livestock.



Hansell



Levy



Nash

"Missing livestock claims go unverified, and payments provide an incentive to blame wolves for losses that most likely have other causes," she said.

Advocates, however, say the increase is long overdue, and that the fund has not fully compensated ranchers for livestock lost to wolves.

Todd Nash, a rancher in Wallowa County and the president of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, said his members are tired of absorbing financial losses from wolf predation.

"The whole deal with wolves coming back to Oregon was that no one was to bear the burden," he said. "But it's landed directly on the shoulders of livestock owners."

Besides lost animals, Nash said wolves hurt the herd. They cause livestock to stick together in open areas that have already been grazed, and animals can lose weight with conception rates dropping, according to the Agriculture Department.

Nash said the birth rate among pregnant cows in his herd dropped from 95% to 82% when wolves were near.

At stake is the balance of interests the fund aimed to achieve when it was established more than 10 years ago.

The return of gray wolves in Oregon

The first gray wolves to return to Oregon wandered into the eastern part of the state in the late 1990s, more than 50 years after they had been effectively hunted and pushed out of the country. The numbers in the western United States had been steadily growing since the wolves were added to the endangered species list in 1974 and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had increased resources to protect them.

In 2005, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife created a conservation management plan to ensure the survival of wolves in the state. By 2009,

wolves had become more permanently established in Oregon again.

In 2012, the state wildlife agency joined the state Department of Agriculture, livestock owners and conservationists to create the wolf compensation fund to help farmers and ranchers pay for nonlethal methods to keep wolves away from livestock and to compensate for livestock lost to wolves.

Several other states in the West and the Great Lakes region have created similar wolf compensation funds, but they require proof of wolf predation. Oregon is the only state that pays money for missing livestock that owners assume have been killed.

How the program works

The state Fish and Wildlife Department investigates livestock deaths when it's clear that a wolf was involved.

The agency investigated 73 deaths in 2020 and approved 31. The owners received full payment, averaging about \$1,000 to \$1,200 per animal.

Officials in the 12 Eastern Oregon counties that participate in the wolf depredation fund investigate reports of missing livestock.

A county committee considers evidence such as photos of scat, pictures of wolf tracks and footage from trail cameras to

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Business fundraiser contributes to school district program

BELLA owner Beverly Calder donated nearly \$6,300 to La Grande's Angel Fund

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A fundraising program with a hazelnut twist led by La Grande and Baker City business owner Beverly Calder is giving an important La Grande School District program a big boost.

Calder recently presented the school district with a donation of \$6,299 for its Angel Fund. All money from the Angel Fund goes to the school district's Youth in Transition Program, which assists La Grande School District families that qualify as homeless under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

Calder, the owner of BELLA mercantile shops in La Grande and Baker City, raised money for the Angel Fund and two other causes during a holiday-season fundraiser at both stores. She donated 10% of the stores' sales in December to the Angel Fund, the Baker City Quiet Zone and the Baker City Relief Nursery.



Dick Mason/The Observer

Beverly Calder, center, with Wanda Allred, left, and Jose de Jesus Melendez pose for a photo with a check to the La Grande School District's Angel Fund during a ceremony at Willow School — La Grande School District's administrative office building — on Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022. Calder donated \$6,299 to the La Grande School District's Angel Fund, a major source of funding for its Youth in Transition Program, which supports homeless and unaccompanied students. Allred is the district's Youth in Transition liaison, and Melendez is its director of student success and engagement.

The Baker City Quiet Zone seeks to reduce train whistles and improve railroad crossings, and the Baker City Relief Nursery helps families with young children.

The amount Calder donated to each of the three causes was determined by its customers. For every \$10 spent, a customer was given a hazelnut or walnut

to put in a stocking labeled for the charity. Each nut represented \$1 for the organization. A total of \$17,597 was raised by the BELLA stores for the three causes.

"It was incredibly fun," Calder said. "The holidays always are."

Calder said she wanted to do something enjoyable after the

difficult two years people have experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic. She also wanted to introduce her customers to three organizations that "we really believe in."

Jose de Jesus Melendez, the La Grande School District's director of student success, said Calder's donation is most meaningful.

"It is such a blessing to see that kind of a donation. It means that we can do that much more to help," he said.

The Angel Fund is operated by the school district, but all of the money in it comes from private donations. Money from the fund is spent to help homeless and unaccompanied students in the Youth in Transition Program pay school fees, assist members of their families with getting birth certificates and purchase supplies for the program's food pantry.

Melendez said a big plus of the Angel Fund is that there are no restrictions on how it can be used, unlike state and federal grants.

"Angel Fund money can be used to help families in need in any way possible," Melendez said, adding the ultimate goal is to remove barriers so that families can fully access education.