

EMPLOYMENT: Oregon's job growth ranks as eighth-fastest in the country

Continued from 1A

rebounding more slowly than their urban counterparts. Out of 23 counties identified as "rural" or "non-metro," 17 remain below their peak employment prior to the 2007-09 recession.

Morrow County bucks that trend in a big way, thanks largely to the Port of Morrow in Boardman which has leveraged available land and infrastructure to recruit a diverse economic base including food processors, biofuels and a recent proliferation of large online data centers.

Dallas Fridley, state regional economist, said Morrow County was not as exposed to industries hit hardest by the recession, such as wood products or transportation equipment manufacturing. On the contrary, manufacturing across the county actually increased from 1,050 jobs in 2008 to almost 1,500 jobs in 2015, driven primarily by expansions in food processing plants.

"That industry continues to grow," Fridley said.

Overall, Oregon's job growth ranks as eighth-fastest in the country, though rural counties account for just 13 percent of that growth with 238,000 jobs combined — "a small enough share to be lost in broader analyses of the state economy," says the Employment Department.

The agency's report takes into account factors such as limited infrastructure and aging workforce in rural areas, as well as communities that may depend on just a few industries, making them more vulnerable to economic shocks.

Fridley said Morrow County has managed to dodge those impacts compared to its neighbors that are yet to fully recover from the recession. Employment is still down by as much as 20.2 percent in Gilliam County and 15.6 percent in Grant County, compared to pre-recession peaks.

"In some respects, (Morrow County) is an island," Fridley said. "There really wasn't a dip in employment related to the recession."

Food processing at the Port of Morrow has grown hand in hand with the region's irrigated agriculture, which Fridley said has tacked on 785 jobs since 2001. That has fueled companies like Lamb Weston and Tillamook Cheese to expand their local facilities, with 37 percent of Morrow County's private sector jobs now in manufacturing.

That increase in manufacturing jobs has also translated into higher average wages. Between 2008 and 2016, the average Morrow County wage climbed 47 percent to \$52,782, beating the statewide average of \$48,847 and ranking third behind only Washington and Multnomah counties.

Total payroll for private industry jobs more than doubled in the county between 2008 and 2016, rising from \$120.1 million to \$252.1 million.

"That's incredible," Fridley said. "I can definitely say that didn't happen anywhere else."

Gary Neal, general manager for the Port of Morrow, said he doesn't see that momentum slowing down any time soon. Last year, the port finished an expansion of its freezer warehouse which is now capable of holding 85 million pounds of frozen products for its expanding food processors.

Other projects are also in the works, Neal said, including two new building permits for data centers at the port. If the Legislature passes a state transportation package, he said the port is also eyeing further road and rail improvements.

"We're making investments today for the future," Neal said. "It's a constant effort."

Don Russell, a Morrow County commissioner and former Port of Morrow commissioner, said the region was fortunate to avoid a recession in agriculture, which has long been the

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— Dallas Fridley, state regional economist

bread and butter of the northeast Oregon economy. The port, meanwhile, has continued to diversify its job base with ample electricity for data centers.

"They've just added to that base," Russell said.

As for Umatilla County, Fridley said employment has nearly battled its way back to pre-recession peaks, down just 1.5 percent. It's a remarkable feat, he explained, considering the loss of federal jobs at the Umatilla Chemical Depot and nearly 1,000 positions axed from the professional and business services sector.

In its place, Fridley said Umatilla County — much like Morrow County — is adding manufacturing jobs that provided an additional \$28.5 million in payroll between 2008 and 2016.

"You lost a couple of pretty important industries, yet the county has moved itself pretty close to even territory again," he said.

What's more, Fridley said Morrow and Umatilla counties rank second and third in the state, respectively, in natural population increase, meaning there are more births than deaths. That will eventually result in a larger and younger workforce that can continue to push job trends in the right direction, Fridley said.

"Umatilla and Morrow counties are pretty unique," he said. "They definitely have some things working for them."

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ECHO: Construction to be completed by December 2019

Continued from 1A

ease to build an access road. And he worries what his home will smell like when the project gets up and running.

"It would trash my place," he said. "It would never be the same."

City administrator Diane Berry said in an email to the *East Oregonian* that the proposed project would not take Yunker's home, as rumored around Echo, but would only encompass a "small piece" of field.

When private property owners like Yunker refuse to sell their land to make way for a public project, the government does have the power to go to court and take the land via eminent domain. The property owner is given fair market value as compensation, but they don't get a choice of refusing to sell.

In this case, the city of Echo will argue that the property is needed for a sewer system upgrade, which Berry said the city has faced "epic" problems in trying to complete, including lack of funding and changing regulations. If the project does not go forward soon, she said the small city could face "tremendous fines."

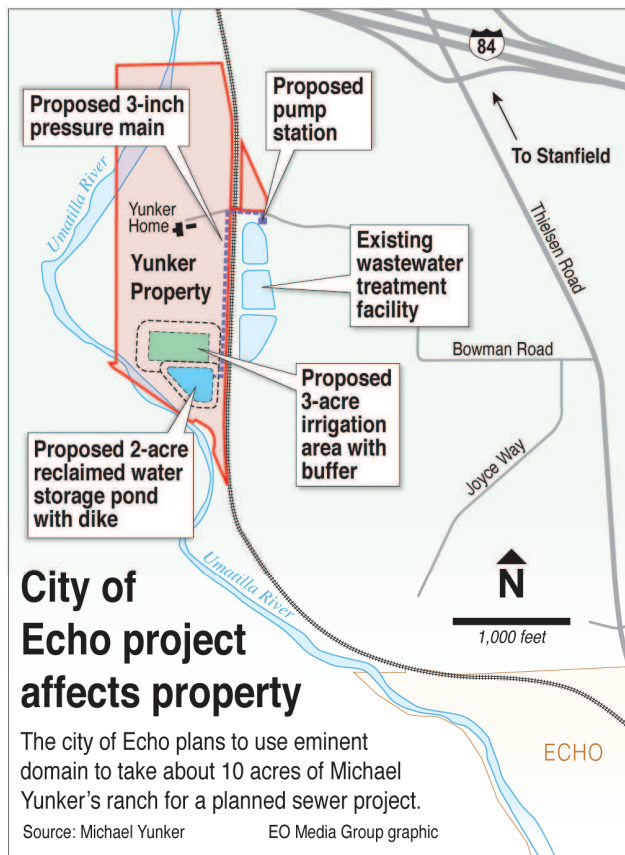
Paul Daniello, a natural resources specialist at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality's Pendleton office, said the city of Echo is under order to upgrade its sewer system because the recycled water it is discharging into the Umatilla River does not meet permit requirements for biochemical oxygen demand, which are in place to make sure there is enough dissolved oxygen in the river for organisms like fish to survive.

Daniello said when it first became a problem more than 10 years ago, the city signed a mutual agreement with the DEQ to meet less strict, interim limits while it planned an upgrade and pursued funding. The city is now on its sixth extension of that agreement, which now requires construction to be



Cattle graze in the 10 acres of irrigated farm land the City of Echo wants to convince Michael Yunker to sell and turn into a reclaimed water pond and irrigation field for an upgrade to the city's sewer system.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



completed by December 2019.

"This has been dragging on for a number of years," Daniello said.

There is no guarantee the DEQ will grant another extension, which is why the city is anxious to begin the upgrade project. According to drawings given to Yunker, treated water previously discharged into the Umatilla River would instead go into an approximately 10-acre section of Yunker's ranch, using a two-acre water pond slowly emptying into a three-acre irrigation field

with 100-foot buffer.

The need for the project is clear, given the DEQ fines hanging over the city's head. But what is less clear to Yunker is why the city can't locate the project somewhere else.

That's a question that went unanswered after a follow-up email to Berry, but minutes from the council's November 17, 2016 meeting show that mayor Jeanie Hampton stated she felt that Echo residents would understand the city's decision to pursue Yunker's land, given another possible

site would take a projected \$100,000 to develop and was part of a sale that would take up to a year to finalize.

Her comments came following a unanimous vote by the council to "authorize the city attorney and (engineer) Anderson Perry and Associates to move forward with the condemnation of the needed portion of the Yunker property."

Yunker received the letter from Kuhn Law Offices about two weeks later. He said after sustaining brain damage in an explosion at the LNG natural gas plant in Plymouth, Washington, he has trouble expressing his thoughts out loud, so a friend helped him put his thoughts down in a letter he intended to read at the next city council meeting. He said the council told him he needed to read the letter to them in a closed-door executive session.

Yunker said he has tried to make his reasons for not wanting to sell to the city clear: He plans to pass the ranch, which he purchased in 1985, down to his children.

The property is not for sale, he said, and certainly not for a sewer project that will "greatly devalue my home and remaining acreage."

Since his appearance at city council, Yunker said he has not heard back from the city.

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