

**BRIEFLY**

**RDO employee receives John Deere degree**

HERMISTON — Jamie Newton, a service technician at RDO Equipment Co. in Hermiston, recently earned the master service technician degree from John Deere University.

A web-based learning portal for dealership employees, the program offers technicians the opportunity to grow their equipment knowledge and advance their skills working with agricultural machines. It combines online courses with instructor-led training.

Newton's interest in the degree began nearly six years ago. He is looking forward to using the skills and putting the knowledge into practice each day at his job.

Ryan Bense, service advisor, said the company is proud to invest in the continued learning and development of team members. Newton's degree, he said, will benefit customers.

"Jamie is well-respected by many of our customers and, in achieving the master service technician status, he will continue to build strong relationships with more of them," Bense said. "He strives to be the best at what he does and I can't wait to see what the future holds for him."

Founded in 1968, RDO Equipment Co. sells and supports agriculture, construction, environmental, positioning, surveying, and irrigation equipment from leading manufacturers including John Deere. It has 78 locations across the United States, including Hermiston, Pendleton and Pasco, and partnerships in Africa, Australia, Mexico, Russia, and Ukraine. For more information, visit [www.rdoequipment.com](http://www.rdoequipment.com).

**H&R Block hosts open house**

HERMISTON — People interested in learning more about H&R Block's Income Tax Course are invited to an open house.

There is no tuition for the classes, which provide new skills. In addition to learning to prepare taxes, people can earn additional money.

The open house event is Tuesday, July 11 from 10 a.m. to noon and 6-8 p.m. at Hermiston Plaza, 860 Highway 395, Hermiston. For more information, call 509-579-9976.

To enroll in the Income Tax Course in Hermiston, visit [www.hrblock.com/class](http://www.hrblock.com/class) or call 800-472-5625.

**Struggling Sears closing more stores**

NEW YORK (AP) — Struggling department store chain Sears says it's closing even more stores as it tries to turn around its business.

Sears Holdings Corp. CEO Eddie Lampert said in a blog post Friday that the company would close another eight Sears and 35 Kmart stores that are unprofitable by early October. Hundreds of store closings have already been announced this year.

Sears had said in March that there was "substantial doubt" it could continue after years of bleeding money, though it has insisted that its actions to regroup should help reduce that risk. With more people shopping online, mall foot traffic has dropped. Lampert noted Friday that

Sears has opened smaller stores to attract customers and is on track to cut \$1.25 billion in yearly costs.

There were 624 Kmart stores and 651 Sears stores as of the end of April.

Sears stock dipped 2.1 percent to \$7.76 in afternoon trading.

**U.S. oil rig count jumps to 952**

HOUSTON (AP) — The number of rigs exploring for oil and natural gas in the U.S. increased by 12 this week to 952.

A year ago, just 440 rigs were active.

Houston oilfield services company Baker Hughes said Friday that 763 rigs sought oil and 189 explored for natural gas this week.

Among major oil- and gas-producing states, Oklahoma and Alaska each gained four rigs. Louisiana and Texas were up two apiece.

New Mexico and Utah each declined by one.

Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Wyoming were all unchanged.

The U.S. rig count peaked at 4,530 in 1981. It bottomed out in May of 2016 at 404.

**Mississippi's largest solar facility begins generating power**

SUMRALL, Miss. (AP) — Mississippi's largest solar power installation is now making electricity.

Mississippi Power Co. is contracted to buy electricity for 25 years from the \$100 million Lamar County facility, owned by D.E. Shaw Renewable Investments.

Leaders of D.E. Shaw and Mississippi Power, as well as former U.S. Sen. Trent Lott, gathered Friday to dedicate the 600-acre facility, which began sending electricity to the grid last week.

The Sumrall facility has about 220,000 solar panels and can generate 52 megawatts of electricity, enough power for 8,000 homes.

Mississippi Power is also buying electricity from a 50 megawatt facility near Hattiesburg, a 3 megawatt Gulfport facility, and is supporting a proposed facility near Meridian.

**Nuns against pipeline build chapel along route**

COLUMBIA, Pa. (AP) — A group opposing a natural gas pipeline slated to go through land owned by some Pennsylvania nuns has built a prayer chapel on the proposed right of way.

Lancaster Against Pipelines and the sisters, The Adorers of the Blood of Christ, plan to dedicate the chapel at a prayer service on Sunday.

Williams Partners is the group building the pipeline across 183 miles of Pennsylvania. It has asked a Lancaster County judge for an emergency order to seize the land. A ruling on that is pending.

The company's spokesman says the chapel is a "blatant attempt to impede pipeline construction."

The nuns say in a press release that they "revere Earth as a sanctuary where all life is protected" and contend the pipeline violates their commitment to the environment.

**Hiring surges in sign of U.S. economic vitality**

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hiring surged in June in a surprising show of U.S. economic vitality eight years into the recovery from the Great Recession. Pay gains remain weak, though, a stark reminder of one of the economy's key shortcomings.

Employers added 222,000 jobs last month, and hiring in the previous two months was revised much higher. Job gains have now averaged nearly 180,000 a month this year, only slightly below last year's pace.

Unemployment ticked up to 4.4 percent from 4.3 percent, but mostly for a good reason: More Americans started looking for work, a sign of confidence in the economy.

Last month, economists worried that hiring would slow as employers struggled to fill jobs from a dwindling supply of unemployed workers. Friday's data suggests companies are still finding plenty of people to hire.

That has given economists greater confidence the economy still has room to run.

"This balanced pace should enable the current economic expansion to be maintained much beyond the historical norm," Russell Price, senior economist for Ameriprise Financial, said.

The current expansion is



AP Photo/Alan Diaz

In this May 22 photo, a "Now Hiring" sign welcomes a customer entering a Best Buy store in Hialeah, Fla. U.S. employers added a robust 222,000 jobs in June, the most in four months.

the third-longest on record.

So far, the job market and economy look broadly the same as they did last year, though President Donald Trump has boasted that his policies are accelerating hiring and growth.

The economy's durability appears to be benefiting more people. The unemployment rate among blacks fell in June to its lowest level in 17 years, at 7.1 percent. The gap with whites, whose rate was 3.8 percent, persisted. The rate among Latinos dropped to 4.8 percent, the lowest in 11 years.

Even with June's strong hiring, average hourly pay rose just 2.5 percent from a year earlier. The last time the unemployment rate was this low, wages were rising by

roughly 4 percent. Normally, as the number of unemployed dwindles, employers raise pay to attract job seekers.

Economists offer a number of explanations for why that dynamic hasn't yet kicked in.

One factor: The influx of job seekers last month — who had previously been on the sidelines, not counted as unemployed — might have offset some upward wage pressures. Employers had more applicants to choose from.

Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, said many workers are too cautious to push for raises, partly because of the lingering effects of the Great Recession, when nearly 9 million people lost their jobs.

And some businesses have decided they can't raise prices enough to afford meaningful pay raises.

That cycle of limited wage gains and low prices has kept inflation in check.

John McAuliffe, chief executive of Sylvan Learning, a company that offers tutoring to students from kindergarten through high school, is hiring more teachers and expanding. Yet it is cutting costs to maintain profits, rather than raising prices.

The company has opened 10 new locations since March, creating about 100 jobs, mostly part-time.

"More people have the ability to afford tutoring for their children," McAuliffe says.

But the company sees little need to raise pay.

"A lot of teachers look for supplemental income," he said. "We've always been able to find them."

Economists forecast the economy will expand at roughly a 2 percent pace this year, about the same as it has grown since the recession ended.

The economy appears resilient enough for the Federal Reserve to keep raising its benchmark interest rate. In a report to Congress on Friday, the Fed signaled its belief that the economy is on a firm footing.

**Tesla to build giant battery in Australia amid energy crisis**

SYDNEY (AP) — Tesla announced on Friday it will build the world's largest lithium-ion battery in southern Australia, part of a bid to solve an energy crisis that has led to ongoing blackouts across the region.

Tesla will partner with French renewable energy company Neoen to build the 100-megawatt battery farm in South Australia state, with Tesla CEO Elon Musk promising to deliver the system within 100 days of signing the contract or it will be free. The billionaire entrepreneur originally made the 100-day pledge via Twitter in March, and he and South Australia's government confirmed on Friday that the deadline was part of their official agreement.

"The system will be three times more powerful than any system on earth," Musk told reporters in the state capital, Adelaide. "This is not like a minor foray into the frontier — this is like going three times further



Ben Macmahon/AAP Image via AP

Tesla CEO Elon Musk talks about the development of the world's biggest lithium-ion battery in Adelaide, Australia, Friday.

than anyone's gone before."

South Australia, which relies heavily on solar and wind-generated energy, has been scrambling to find a way to bolster its fragile power grid since the entire state suffered a blackout during a storm last year. Further blackouts plagued the state over the next few months.

The battery farm is part

of a \$420 million plan announced in March by South Australia Premier Jay Weatherill to make the state independent of the nation's power grid. The Australian Energy Market Operator, which manages the national grid, has warned of potential shortages of gas-fired electricity across southeast Australia by late next year. The shortage is looming

as Australia is expected to soon overtake Qatar as the world's biggest exporter of liquid natural gas. Australia is also a major exporter of coal, which fires much of its electricity generation.

The South Australia battery will store energy from Neoen's Hornsdale Wind Farm near Jamestown, about 120 miles north of Adelaide. It will deliver energy during peak usage hours to help maintain the state's supply, and could power 30,000 homes, Tesla said.

"You can essentially charge up the battery packs when you have excess power and where the cost is very low, and it discharges when the cost of production is high — this lowers the average cost per hour to the customer," Musk said. "It's a fundamental efficiency improvement."

The installation of the battery is expected to be complete by December. The cost of the project has not been released.

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