

Summit: Health services expected to see the biggest economic growth

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looked at various industries in the region and projected where they would be through 2027. The department predicts that there will be 7,500 jobs added to the economy during that time, and nearly nine out of 10 of those jobs will come from the private sector. Health services was expected to see the biggest increase, followed by transportation, warehousing, and utilities. Other growth industries include construction, manufacturing, and leisure and hospitality.

"Is that growth outrageous?" Rich said. "It's actually a little tame."

He then flipped to a slide that showed that many of the anticipated growth industries had shown more dramatic growth from 2007 to now than their future projections.

Eastern Oregon has come a long way from the recession, when unemployment peaked at 7.9% and more

than a third of the region's unemployed were without work long term. Unemployment has now fallen to 5.1% and long-term unemployment has been cut in half.

With the economy recovered, representatives from the lumber and drone industry highlighted their fields.

Lindsay Warness, the safety and environmental manager for Woodgrain Millwork, a Fruitland, Idaho, wood products manufacturer that recently bought lumber mills in Pilot Rock and La Grande, said she thought Woodgrain could play a role in the projected growth in the manufacturing sector.

"It's dirty work, but there's a lot of satisfaction and we get a lot done at the end of the day," she said.

Warness said the Northeast Oregon timber industry has been hit hard by environmental regulations, losing 1,800 jobs since 1997.

While the state's employ-

ment department didn't anticipate much growth in the region's tech industry, Ken Bisconer, the West Coast director of flight operations for PAE ISR, a Virginia-based defense contractor that tests its Resolute Eagle drone at the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range, was optimistic that PAE and its growing workforce would prove the projection wrong.

Bisconer said most of the people he works with are ex-military, but he'd like to recruit more people outside the armed forces by training students in high school and Blue Mountain Community College.

"It's a job you can hang your hat on," he said. "It's a retirement job."

Bisconer estimated that his employees contribute a total of \$80,000 to \$100,000 to Pendleton per month, and they could continue to do so as PAE prepares to bid on

several nine- and 10-figure government contracts.

One area of the Eastern Oregon economy that isn't seeing growth is the number of young and middle-aged workers.

"As a share of the workforce, we're seeing a loss of the 45- to 54-year-olds in Eastern Oregon. That corresponds with changes in population as well," Rich said. "We're seeing older age groups work longer, but we're seeing a drop in the younger age groups."

While Rich said his presentation just scratched the surface of the data at the employment department's disposal, he made his pitch in front of an influential crowd.

In addition to government officials and business leaders, the audience eventually swelled to include several legislators, the Oregon state treasurer, and former congressional candidate Jamie McLeod-Skinner.

SNAP: In an attempt to close a loophole, thousands of Oregonians could lose benefits

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tance to Needy Families program and SNAP — Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

How many of those residents would no longer be eligible, however, is not known.

State officials are trying to come up with an estimate, said Heather Miles, an operations and policy analyst for the Department of Human Service's Self-Sufficiency Program.

"We're trying to work on county-level data as much as we can, because we know how important that's going to be for local areas," Miles said.

The Agriculture Department said that the rule would close "a loophole" that enables people receiving only minimal benefits from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program to be eligible automatically for food stamps without undergoing further checks on their income or assets.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue called it a "loophole."

"Too often, states have misused this flexibility without restraint," U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue said in a statement. "That is why we are changing the rules, preventing abuse of a critical safety net system, so those who need food assistance the most are the only ones who receive it."

Trump administration officials estimate 3.1 million people nationwide could lose benefits under SNAP.

If the rule is adopted, those on TANF would have to apply separately for SNAP. The federal government estimates about 3 million people would not otherwise meet the requirements for SNAP. That would result in a net savings of about \$9.4 billion over five years.

According to DHS figures as of 2017, around 911,000 people in Oregon were part of the SNAP program and almost 100,000 were receiving benefits through TANF. Eligibility is determined by factors including monthly income and number of dependent children. According to Oregon statistics, in June of this year about 15,100 Umatilla County residents received SNAP benefits — that's about 18.7% of county residents.

In Morrow County, about 2,600 residents

received SNAP benefits during June — 21.9% of the county's population.

That's the seventh-highest rate among Oregon's 36 counties.

SNAP benefits to Umatilla County residents totaled about \$1.65 million during June 2019, and Morrow County residents received about \$276,000, according to state records.

Miles said the federal proposal would change the income eligibility threshold for Oregon residents from the current 185% of the federal poverty level, to 130%.

An Oregon family of three currently qualifies for SNAP benefits if its monthly income is less than \$3,288, Miles said.

The proposed change would drop that limit, for a family of three, to \$2,252 per month.

The maximum monthly SNAP benefit is \$505 for a family of three, Miles said.

Although state officials are still analyzing data to derive an estimate for how many Oregonians might lose SNAP benefits, Miles said it's likely that counties with higher percentages of older residents would be more affected, proportionally.

That's in part because the federal proposal would mean some SNAP recipients, including elderly residents, would no longer be automatically eligible as they are now, Miles said.

Oregon is one of 43 states that qualifies some residents for SNAP benefits, without requiring them to verify their income and expenses, for certain reasons, including if they also qualify for another federal program — Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

That's known as a "categorical eligibility," Miles said.

If the federal government stops allowing Oregon to use the categorical eligibility process, residents would have to go through a longer process, which would be more expensive to the state, to apply for SNAP benefits, she said.

According to state records, of the 15,101 Umatilla County residents who received SNAP benefits in June, 1,719 are older than 60 and 1,747 are younger than 5.

The figures for Morrow County are 253 recipients older than 60, and 327 younger than 5.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Two campers participate in an acting and movement game during a breakout session Thursday morning.

Camp: Residents welcome drama with open hearts

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tion for this weekend's performance. The plays give students the opportunity to work with fellow actors of different ages.

Unlike other theater camps, Flagg says that she stresses the importance of giving every kid an important role rather than having younger kids play parts of the scenery or rocks.

"The teaching that I do in Pendleton teaches the importance of stepping up for themselves and taking risks," Flagg said. "You need to be able to take the

focus and give it to others; it is not theater just for the extrovert."

Youths attending the camp seem to resonate well with the teaching style that Flagg emphasizes. Many of the campers attend the camp year after year to learn new ideas and skills as well as work on their confidence on the stage. Maddie Thompson, 17, has been attending the camp for nine years and credits it with much of her confidence and public speaking ability.

"One of my first years here I was playing a lion and I couldn't speak up,

let alone be loud and roar on stage," Thompson said. "The people here supported me and allowed me to reach outside my comfort zone and from there I have just skyrocketed to a leadership position where I can be comfortable yelling on stage and playing whatever character is necessary."

While Thompson is now part of the camp's leadership structure in a newly founded "leadership ensemble" that helps to support younger campers, the same experiences are echoed by those in their first years at

the camp. Kaitlyn Shaver, 8, showed up on the first day of camp with no prior theater experience.

"When you experience that, it is like something that you want to know for the rest of your life," said Shaver. "It was something that I heard about and just really wanted to try."

The groups of campers will put their theater skills on display Saturday during an original compilation of seven short acts entitled "The Forgiveness Plays" that were written, rehearsed and directed throughout the week of camp.

Power: Base wholesale rate will remain at \$35.62 per megawatt-hour

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be changes to your retail rate," said Maryam Habibi, a public affairs specialist for BPA.

Habibi said that retail rates are determined by local utilities, and while the average cost will remain flat, some products will experience a rate change.

Flattening the base power rate was made possible by reductions totaling \$66 million in projected program costs.

Last year, the BPA's Integrative Program Review accrued \$56 million in savings, in part due to a \$30 million annual reduction to Fish and Wildlife program expenses.

The administration identified another \$10 million savings from the decommissioning of nuclear projects in Washington.

There is an increasing chance, however, that the average rate could rise by 1.5% — below the rate of inflation — in the future due to a surcharge that



The Bonneville Power Administration, which provides wholesale power to Umatilla Electric Company, Hermiston Energy Services, Pacific Power and other area utilities, has reported that the average wholesale base power cost will remain flat for the 2020-21 fiscal year.

will initiate if the BPA has less than 60 days worth of money for both its power

and transmission lines.

"When BPA makes a change in their rates, it

becomes one of the many factors that go into figuring out our rates," said Tom

Gaunt, a spokesman for Pacific Power. "Any BPA rate (change) should not

have any major effect on people who get their power from us."

Pacific Power rates are determined by state procedure.

Starting Oct. 1, with interim federal approval, BPA's average transmission rate will increase by 3.6%, which was lower than initial estimates.

Earlier this week, the *Seattle Times* reported that BPA had raised its rates by 30% over the last nine years, and that some regional public utility executives are considering other producers as contracts expire in 2028.

"Through collaboration with our customers and partners throughout the region, we have worked hard to bend the cost curve and keep base power rates flat," BPA Administrator Elliot Mainzer said in a recent press release.

Both Umatilla Electric Cooperative and Hermiston Energy Services were unavailable for comment prior to publication.

AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File