

Shortage: Silver Creek offering \$500 incentive bonus

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Job openings abound

Varon Blackburn, human resources manager for the farm, said he has noticed a significant change in the number of applicants for jobs across all skill levels and pay ranges.

"It used to be, I had a receptionist opening, I would get 10 to 20 applicants, and one's been open two weeks and I've gotten three applicants," he said.

The farm's website doesn't list salaries for the open positions, but Blackburn said the lowest wages on the farm are more than \$13 an hour, with many hourly workers making \$15 to \$16. Some skilled positions make more — shop mechanics make \$18 to \$26 an hour depending on experience. He said they have been turning to visa programs to recruit workers from Mexico to fill positions.

Blackburn said he feels the supplemental unemployment benefits that were put in place when unemployment spiked during the early days of the pandemic are now providing disincentives for people to return to the workforce when work is readily available.

He said child care also is a problem. He recently hired someone as an accountant after struggling to fill the position, he said, but she changed her mind before her start date, saying she hadn't been able to find child care.

To help combat that problem, the Port of Morrow has an early learning center that Threemile Canyon Farms contributes financially to, and Blackburn said the farm offers discounted vouchers to employees.

Another major employer, Lamb Weston, does not list starting salaries in its



Workers process potatoes as they are loaded into a storage facility at Threemile Canyon Farms near Boardman on Sept. 30, 2020. The Boardman farm lists 17 open positions on its website.

Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

job descriptions, but as of Monday, May 24, listed 49 open positions between its Boardman and Hermiston locations. Job titles that have been listed for more than 30 days include operations support specialist for human resources, process quality technician and package handler.

Amazon has 45 jobs open in the Boardman area, most of which were posted more than 30 days ago. The oldest job posting on their website is a data center facility manager position that, according to the site, was posted in November 2020. Some of the jobs posted require a bachelor's degree plus multiple years

of post-college experience, while others simply require a high school diploma.

Angela Boatman, plant manager for Alto Columbia (formerly Pacific Ethanol), said the company raised its starting wages from \$16.50 and hour to \$19 an hour but still has struggled to fill open positions.

"We've looked at lowering requirements for jobs as well," she said. "We're willing to train people."

Of those who have sent in applications, she estimated 60% have not returned any calls or other efforts the company has made to get an interview scheduled. Boatman said she recently partic-

ipated in the virtual job fair the Port of Morrow hosted, and no one visited the breakout room on Zoom where she was waiting to answer questions from potential applicants.

She said she hopes that perhaps when school starts up again in the fall and parents have more certainty about child care, that some of the hiring crunch will ease.

Candidates turn down jobs

Mike Duncan, owner of Silver Creek Contracting, said his company has more than 20 positions open, that in some cases have been advertised for more than a year.

They range from carpenters and welders to a site supervisor.

He said the company has done free and sponsored advertising on Zip Recruiter and Indeed, as well as posting jobs to Facebook and Craigslist and working through the employment department. Silver Creek also is offering a \$500 incentive bonus.

Duncan said he has had multiple job candidates turn down offers with a competitive wage, and has heard from people they are making enough on unemployment benefits not to want to go back to work. He said unemployment benefits should serve to help people get back

on their feet after a job loss, but should not turn into a career.

"Unemployment has a specific purpose whether you agree with it or not," he wrote in an email. "We have not required the same qualifying parameters for unemployment as we do for employment and now the unemployment pay scale has climbed to a living wage level without any of the same requirements for employment such as transportation, drug testing policies or any accountability to hold down a job. What could possibly motivate a human to seek work?"

A growing number of states, mostly led by Republican legislatures, have recently announced an end to increased unemployment benefits, citing worry the benefits are keeping people from working when they are able to.

According to reporting from FOX Business, President Joe Biden and members of his administration have pushed back on that notion, blaming lack of affordable child care, fear of COVID-19 and other factors instead. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a May press briefing the industry adding the most jobs in April was the leisure and hospitality industry, which tends to have lower wages than most sectors and would therefore have more incentive to continue collecting unemployment.

In Oregon, the state recently announced that Oregonians must start showing they are actively looking for work by July 31 to keep collecting their benefits. That requirement was in place before the pandemic but was waived in 2020.

Vaccine: According to state data, 22,026 county residents have been vaccinated

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or not it gets us to 90% or 75%, to me it doesn't matter. You want to be as accurate as to what the results are. And right now it isn't."

The state recently announced that counties are eligible to move to lower risk when 65% of residents over the age of 16 have received at least their first shot. The move would lift restrictions on indoor gatherings and commerce.

And when the state reaches 70% of residents partially vaccinated, capacity limits on most public activities statewide would be lifted — a benchmark Brown said she expects the state will meet sometime in June.

Umatilla County officials say confirming this data gives the county a chance to move down a risk category and lift restrictions. But even if the data was corrected, it's unlikely to make a significant dent and move the county beyond 65%, officials say.

"Yes, it would help," said Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock. "But we'd still be nowhere near 65%."

According to Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara, county health officials recently obtained data from the federal government and the health department in Walla Walla County suggesting Umatilla County's real vaccine percentage should be about 5% higher, up to approximately 39%.

But even that data is limited, Fiumara said. It does not include some health care providers in Washington, such as local pharmacies and Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla.

"It's not a huge jump," Fiumara said of the data. "But it also tells us there's more of

this out there."

He added: "We don't know how high that number will get. And we don't want our lack of trying to get this information to be a hold up for the county being able to open up."

Hansell said he recognized that residents will see no impact if correcting the data doesn't move the county to lower risk, but said the county cannot get to 65% without getting to 39%.

"I had no illusions that we're going to get to 90% if everybody was counted," he said. "But there are thousands of people out there for sure who are not being counted, and we need to count them."

Fiumara said it's more likely restrictions will be lifted by the state reaching the 70% benchmark than the county reaching 65%. But there are other reasons for gathering the data, as higher percentages can "give people an incentive to take that initiative" and get vaccinated, he said.

"I think one of the things that is hurting our vaccination process is the assumption that nobody else is getting it," he said. "And we don't think that's actually the case. And if we can get this data together and show that there's actually more people who have taken it than they think, it might change a few minds, specifically for the folks on the fence."

County health officials now are reaching out to facilities throughout Southeastern Washington to "get a more complete picture of where we're at as a county," Fiumara said.

In all, 22,026 Umatilla County residents have been vaccinated against COVID-19, according to state health data. The county is ranked second lowest in vaccinations per 10,000 people, the data shows.

Obstacle: 'Prayers were answered'

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he planned to vote for Bailey's Bill sans amendments.

When the chair, Rep. Janelle Bynum, D-Clackamas, called for a vote, all 10 members voted aye. On April 19, members of the Senate also passed the bill unanimously after the Senate Judiciary Committee's unanimous recommendation.

Another threat to the bill happened earlier this month when it appeared Chair Bynum likely wasn't going to schedule SB 649 for a hearing by the House Judiciary Committee, a move that essentially would doom the bill. The other members dusted off a rarely used House rule that says if a majority of committee members request a hearing in writing, the chair must schedule one within five days. They wrote a letter to Bynum that all members signed. Given no other choice, Bynum scheduled a hearing.

Filling a gap in the law

During public testimony May 24, former Umatilla County Chief Deputy District Attorney Jaclyn



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Bailey Munck testifies at a House judiciary committee hearing about Bailey's Bill on May 18, 2021, from her home in Athena.

Jenkins spoke about the experience of Munck, now 17. Munck testified earlier during Senate and House committee hearings about sexual abuse during a 2019 volleyball trip by Andrew DeYoe, an English teacher and scorekeeper for the volleyball team. He later abuse her in his classroom. DeYoe, 31, after pleading guilty to harassment that included sexual touching, spent a night in the Umatilla County Jail and will serve five years probation. He wasn't required to register as a sex offender.

If DeYoe had been a

coach, he might have been convicted of a Class C felony, a crime that carries sentences up to five years in prison and a \$125,000 fine.

Jenkins said teachers are in a position of power and authority and therefore should have stiff penalties when they abuse their students.

"To the extent that most sex crimes represent a power imbalance, few relationships embody that imbalance better than a teacher and a student," Jenkins testified. "Teachers can use their authority and their position in the student's life as a way

to give the student a better future. Bailey's case is an illustration of the power of a teacher who chose to use his authority in a different way."

Jenkins said she wasn't saying teachers committing sexual abuse in the second degree should be held to a higher standard than coaches who do the same.

"Both should be held accountable to the highest degree possible for their conduct," she said. "The failure of Oregon statutes to include sexual conduct by teachers as part of the sex abuse in the second degree statute and the election to focus solely on coaches is a serious failure for public safety generally and for Oregon's students specifically. I urge you to make this change, which is both long overdue and badly needed."

The bill next goes to the full House for a vote.

Hansell said he is relieved, as this bill has become very important to him. He said people prayed around the state for the piece of legislation.

"Prayers were answered," he said. "It's a good bill. A lot of good people made this happen, not the least of which was Bailey herself. At the end of the day, the process worked."

2021

EASTERN OREGON PHOTO CONTEST



Official Rules:

Photo Contest open now and closes at 11:59 pm Sunday, June 20, 2021.

Staff will choose the top 10. The public can vote online for People's Choice from 12:01 am Monday, June 21 through 11:59 pm Thursday, June 30.

Digital or scanned photos only, uploaded to the online platform. No physical copies.

Only photographers from Oregon may participate.

The contest subject matter is wide open but we're looking for images that capture life in Eastern Oregon.

Entrants may crop, tone, adjust saturation and make minor enhancements, but may not add or remove objects within the frame, or doctor images such that the final product doesn't represent what's actually before the camera.

The winners will appear in the July 8th edition of Go Magazine; the top 25 will appear online.

Gift cards to a restaurant of your choice will be awarded for first, second and third place.

Submit all photos online at: eastoregonian.com/photocontest