

Union County leads Eastern Oregon in one year jobless increase

Oregon adds 8,300 nonfarm jobs in January

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Unemployment from January 2020 to January 2021 increased in all Eastern Oregon counties, but the largest over-the-year increase came in Union County.

The Oregon Employment Department reported Tuesday, March 9, that unemployment in Union County hit 7.8% in January, a rise in the raw rate of 2 percentage points from the same period the year before. Baker County's rate was 4.1% in January 2020 and increased to 5.6% in January 2021. Wallowa County in that span had the smallest increase, where the raw rate rose 0.7 percentage point to 7.4%.

The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate increased in five Eastern Oregon counties and was unchanged in one.

Again, Union County had the largest increase, rising 1.8 percentage points to 6% with 732 people unemployed and 9,820 working in nonfarm jobs. Harney County saw the smallest increase over the year, rising 0.7 percentage point to 5.0%. Baker County's seasonally adjusted rate of 5.6% means 419 people are unemployed and 5,230 are working in nonfarm jobs. Wallowa County was unchanged at 5%, with 182 in the unemployment line and 2,460 working in nonfarm jobs.

Unemployment in North-eastern Oregon and across the state peaked in April 2020, when the rate hit 13.2% for the state, 12.8% in Wallowa County, 13.2% in Baker County and a whopping 18.6% in Union County, the worst at the time in Eastern Oregon.

The statewide unemployment rate edged down to 6.2% in January from 6.3%, as revised, in

See, *Jobless/Page 2B*



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Red Cross United Drug Store front end manager Misty Golden pauses for a portrait Tuesday, March 9, 2021, in a side room at the store in downtown La Grande. The drug store is undergoing a major remodel, the first in at least 20 years.

Getting a fresh look

Red Cross United Drug Store in La Grande undergoes major remodel

By **DICK MASON**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The interior of Red Cross United Drug Store in La Grande is set to receive a makeover.

The store is preparing to have major renovation work done for the first time in at least 20 years.

"I can't wait (for the renovation work to start). It is much needed. The updating will really brighten things up," said Misty Golden, the store's front end manager.

The revamp work includes repainting the store's interior. The store's paint, much of which is green, will be replaced by a coat of a color to be determined

later, Golden said.

"It will be brighter, that is for sure," she said.

She said Red Cross Drug United Store's green paint dates back to the 1980s.

"It is outdated," Golden said.

The drug store's carpeted floor also is receiving a new look. The store's blue carpet will be removed and replaced by flooring. Golden said the store's carpeting is beginning to fray.

A third project will involve one of the store's two pharmacies, its retail and institutional long term care pharmacy, which serves assisted living centers. Plans call for the retail pharmacy, which is outside the institutional

IFYOU GO

WHAT: Red Cross Drug Store
WHERE: 1123 Adams Ave., La Grande
CONTACT: 541-963-5741
OF NOTE: The store will remain open during remodeling.

pharmacy, to be moved out further into the main store area.

"By extending out both pharmacies, they will each have more room to grow," Golden said.

This growth will include the addition of more rooms for giving shots, for pharmacists to consult with people about drugs and the use of health supplements and more.

Additional space will be

needed in the store to allow for the planned renovation work to be completed. To create this Red Cross United Drug is clearing out a significant amount of merchandise via a remodeling sale.

A date has not been set for the renovation work to start, but this much is certain, the store's hours will not be cut back while the work is done.

"We are not closing, we will be open throughout the remodeling," Golden said.

The process of planning for the renovation work is being complicated by the state's COVID-19 social distancing rules.

"Planning all this has been a little wild," Golden said.

State's carbon cap program takes shape

Plan is simpler than earlier versions that Senate Republicans protested against

By **TED SICKINGER**
The Oregonian/OregonLive

SALEM — After Republicans bolted from the 2020 legislative session and once again killed Oregon's controversial bill to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, a frustrated Gov. Kate Brown issued an executive order for state agencies to draft carbon reduction rules that would achieve the same goals.

Namely, to reduce Oregon's greenhouse gas emissions by 45% below 1990 levels by 2035 and 80% below those levels by 2050.

Those plans are now taking shape, and the heavy lifting will come from the Department of Environmental Quality, which has the authority to regulate emissions from transportation fuels, industry, and electric and natural gas utilities. The Environmental Quality Commission appointed a 34-member advisory committee to help hash out the rules with a goal to have a program up and running by the beginning of next year.

It's a potentially unwieldy panel with representation from environmental and community groups, affected industries and companies, tribes and local government. Reg-

ulated businesses are already raising concerns about the costs of complying with the program. Environmental groups, meanwhile, point to the industry-heavy makeup of the advisory council. They're concerned that electric utilities and some transportation fuel providers will escape any regulation under the program, and that it could allow industry to pollute at higher levels for longer.

"The hope is that DEQ will be able to course correct and get this plan on track to be consistent with best available science," said Zach Baker, Oregon program manager for Climate Solutions, one of the environmental groups represented on the panel. The advisory group "has through June to hammer out the details and land the plane, and the more exemptions we need to talk about, it starts to raise concerns about where this plane will ultimately land."

It's early days yet, but it's clear this will be a simpler, stripped-down version of the program that ultimately blew up two sessions of the Legislature. Gone are the state auctions of emissions allowances to polluters,

See, *Carbon/Page 3B*

Critics claim overtime bill would hurt farm workers

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — Critics claim that requiring Oregon's agriculture industry to pay higher overtime wages would be a "false promise" of help to farm employees, who'd actually lose work opportunities.

Unlike most other employers, farmers don't have to pay workers one-and-a-half times their normal rate if they work more than 40 hours per week, but House Bill 2358 seeks to eliminate that exemption.

Proponents of the bill claim it would end an unjust labor policy with "racist and exclusionary origins" while recognizing the essential role that farm workers have in the state's economy and community.

"They do not belong to a lower class of workers in Oregon," said Rep. Ricki Ruiz, D-Gresham, its chief sponsor. "Exploiting human beings is never a good thing."

Supporters argue that agriculture shouldn't receive unique treatment under the law because other industries, including the construction and retail sectors, also have peak seasons with higher labor demands.

California passed a law in 2016 that's phasing in overtime pay for farm workers while Washington's Supreme Court found that an agricultural exemption to overtime pay was unconstitutional last year, the bill's supporters said.

According to the bill's proponents, protections for farm workers were carved out of the Fair Labor Standards Act, a seminal 1938 federal statute, due to a "legacy of racism" that's reflected in the state's overtime exemption for agriculture.

"It was wrong then, when most farm workers were black. It is wrong now, when most farm workers are Latino," said Teresa Romero, president of the United Farm Workers union. "Every worker should have the same basic rights."

The bill's detractors argue the



Capital Press, File

Workers at A to Z Wineworks in Newberg sort grapes during the 2014 harvest. The 2021 Oregon Legislature is considering a bill that would require the agriculture industry to pay higher overtime wages, a move critics contend would cost farm employees work opportunities.

good intentions behind HB 2358 would fail to materialize in reality because farmers and ranchers are "price takers" subject to the commodity markets who cannot pass along higher costs to their customers.

Farmers cannot afford to pay higher overtime wages and will instead seek to avoid work schedules longer than 40 hours per week by increasing the number of shifts, shifting to less labor-intensive crops, increasing mechanization, or moving out-of-state, according to the bill's opponents.

"I think you may find you're hurting my employees rather than helping them," said Chuck Thomsen, R-Hood River, who grows pears.

Critics of HB 2358 said the exemption for agriculture is necessary because the industry faces short, weather-dependent windows in which work must be completed.

Oregon's cost of doing business is increasing and the state already

has strong protections for workers, such as paid sick leave and a higher minimum wage, while the growing season is relatively short, said Jenny Dresler, lobbyist for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

An amendment to the bill could also penalize employers for even slight pay miscalculations, she said.

A survey of the Oregon Winegrowers Association found that only 10% of its members could absorb the additional costs of paying higher overtime wages, said Brooke Delmas Robertson, a representative of the group whose family owns a vineyard in Northeast Oregon.

Jake Madison, a farmer near Echo, said the organic market currently offers a desirable premium but his operation may have to change practices for crops that require hand-weeding, since herbicide spraying is more labor-efficient.

"It's going to come down to strict cost control measures on this," he said.