

HELP WANTED



Eastern Oregon feels pinch of labor shortage

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Sean Altizer, a server at Nookie's Restaurant & Brewery in Hermiston, looks through orders Saturday, June 26, 2021, at the kitchen window. According to the managers, the restaurant has a full wait staff but the kitchen remains sorely understaffed, with nearly every cook working overtime.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A billboard advertises positions at Northwood Manufacturing and Outdoors RV along Island Avenue on June 28, 2021. The recreational vehicle manufacturer in La Grande has faced an increase in demand for RVs but is struggling to find workers to boost production.

By ALEX WITTWER

EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — The Oregon Employment Department reported the number of residents in Eastern Oregon receiving unemployment benefits is lower now than it was before the pandemic started.

That statistic makes no difference to the lines of orders filing through the printer at Nookie's Restaurant & Brewery in Hermiston, which has struggled to find workers as the nation faces a new complication in the economic recovery from the pandemic.

"I don't have a single cook that's not in overtime right now," said Trevor Olson, the head chef at the restaurant and brewery.

He's been a cook for nearly seven years, shifting around other restaurants in Hermiston and Tri-Cities before coming back to Nookie's last winter. At 25, Olson is in charge of the entire kitchen at the eatery.

"Halibut in 30 seconds," Olson said down the line.

The two prep cooks were busy at the stove as the flames licked at the pans cooking seafood alfredo. Neither are older than 20.

Olson flipped two burgers, flames reached toward the ceiling. The previous head cook quit some time after Umatilla County relaxed its restrictions due to dropping COVID-19 cases in May 2021, leaving Olson and sous chef Lupe Delgado to run the restaurant.

Before his shift started that day, Olson had already clocked 60 hours for the week.

In John Day, nearly every business in the town is struggling to fill positions.

"My crew is having to work seven days, long hours, because we're so short staffed. A couple weeks ago we had to close down just to give people a day off," said Heather Rookstool, a manager at Outpost Pizza Pub & Grill in John Day.

Shawn Duncan, owner of Squeeze-in Restaurant & Deck in John Day, is in the same situation.

"I had been closing early because I couldn't get anyone, and the ones I do have, have been working their butts off," Duncan said. "It's been hard."

Duncan said finding workers is a hurdle for almost every restaurant and business in John Day, and shop windows throughout town display "Help Wanted" signs.

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