

EASTERN OREGON

Labor shortage has ODOT juggling

8-county region has 38 vacancies out of 300 total

BY DICK MASON

The Observer (La Grande)

LA GRANDE — A labor shortage has Oregon Department of Transportation officials juggling schedules and resources in Eastern Oregon as the winter season’s icy grip tightens.

The department’s Eastern Oregon region, which is composed of Morrow, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Baker, Grant, Harney and Malheur counties, has 300 total positions. The region now has 38 vacancies, about 25 of which are permanent and seasonal road maintenance positions, according to Ken Patterson, the manager of ODOT’s Region 5.

The vacancies mean some ODOT crews may have to do more with less as they work to keep Interstate 84 and state highways clear of snow and ice.

“We will do as much as we can with the people we have,” Patterson said.

The employee shortage is linked to a falling number of seasonal workers, who are hired to work from November through April.

“Our No. 1 concern going into winter is seasonal labor,” said Rich Lani, the manager of the agency’s district that covers Umatilla and Morrow counties and the northern half of Union County.



A trio of Oregon Department of Transportation snowplows clear the westbound lanes of Interstate 84.

Ace Clark/ODOT

trict that covers Umatilla and Morrow counties and the northern half of Union County.

Stricter regulations

ODOT’s labor shortage is more difficult to address today than it was two years ago because of a new state regulation that makes the process of earning a commercial driver’s license more time-consuming.

The additional regulations make it harder to find potential employees who are ready to begin driving snowplows and trucks. ODOT is hiring people without CDLs and then helping them earn the accreditation. However, a number of employees leave ODOT after receiving their CDLs because they are now able to land higher paying jobs elsewhere. “Having a CDL gives you more op-

tions,” explained Ace Clark, manager of the district that covers all or portions of Union, Baker and Wallowa counties.

Filling holes

The transportation department is taking a new step this year to keep as many of its winter positions filled as possible. The state is granting travel status to employees who come to

Help wanted

ODOT is accepting applications for open seasonal positions. People interested in the positions can learn more on ODOT’s website, www.oregon.gov/odot.

Region 5 from outside Eastern Oregon to help with winter road work. Employees granted travel status have their meals and lodging expenses paid for, Patterson said. The move has so far drawn in at least two ODOT employees to work in the region.

Patterson, the regional manager, said it is only fair that travel status be granted to ODOT employees traveling from outside the region.

“They are stepping away from lives they have elsewhere,” he said.

Another step the agency is taking involves maintaining its Fire and Ice program, a program that involves ODOT and the Oregon Department of Forestry. Employees in the program are guaranteed year-round work by fighting fires for forestry department in the summer and being employed as seasonal winter employees for ODOT.

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Farm exemptions for streaked horned lark come under fire

BY MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI

Capital Press

Environmental advocates claim federal wildlife regulators have ignored science by doubling down on agricultural exceptions that reduce species protections for the streaked horned lark.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Audubon Society of Portland have threatened to file a new lawsuit challenging Endangered Species Act regulations for the rare bird, which they say are unjustifiably lax.

The controversy has potential implications for farmers in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, where mowing, tilling and other practices are exempted from the federal prohibition against harming the threatened species.

A federal judge previously criticized as “murky” the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s rationale for listing the streaked horned lark as “threatened,” rather than extending more rigorous protections under

an “endangered” classification. U.S. District Judge Michael Mosman said the decision appeared to be a “post-hoc rationalization” and sent it back for reconsideration two years ago, but the environmental nonprofits now claim the federal government hasn’t



While some larks live in other areas of Oregon and Washington, the largest population is in the Willamette Valley.

David Leonard/USFWS

learned from its mistakes. “The Service’s claim that the Lark is not currently in danger of extinction is not supported by the evidence before the agency and does not represent the

best available science,” according to their “intent-to-sue” letter notifying the government of the planned lawsuit.

Streaked horned larks have a double-edged relationship with agriculture that’s highly dependent on timing.

Land-clearing activities prevent vegetation from overgrowing the bare ground on which the birds rely for breeding in springtime.

Field operations may also harm eggs or fledglings, though they often occur late

enough in summer to avoid disrupting nests, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Because agricultural practices help maintain the lark’s habitat, the agency excluded these activities from the ban on “incidental take” of protected species.

The agency reasoned that without such exceptions, landowners may cease farm practices that are conducive to lark habitat, thus ensuring they don’t come under ESA regulation.

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