

ODOT short on road workers

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A shortage of road maintenance employees could create delays in snow removal this winter in Eastern Oregon.

“Fewer people will be running plows. Anytime you have fewer operators it means that work will take longer,” said Oregon Department of Transportation spokesperson Tom Strandberg.

Craig Sipp, manager of ODOT’s Region 5, which encompasses a high percentage of Eastern Oregon, agreed.

“If we have back-to-back storms, it may take us longer to get to some of the secondary highways,” he said.

Sipp said ODOT’s Region 5 has approximately 12 unfilled road maintenance positions, significantly more than what is average for this time of year.

Open positions

Statewide ODOT has 167 road maintenance positions now open. There were 86 openings at the same time in 2020 and 29 in 2019 during the same period. Strandberg said ODOT’s Region 5 has seen openings for maintenance staff steadily since 2019.

Strandberg said it is not known if the COVID-19 pandemic is partially responsible for the employee shortage. Strandberg said 99% of ODOT’s employees in Oregon complied with



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

A snowplow heads out to battle drifts on Highway 82 near Imbler early in the morning on Feb. 18.

the state’s COVID-19 vaccine mandate which took effect in October. This meant that 99% of ODOT’s employees either were vaccinated or filed for and received an exemption for health or religious reasons.

He said it is unknown if some of the employees who retired this year did so because of concerns about the state vaccine mandate.

ODOT always adds to its road maintenance staff in the winter, Strandberg said, and many of those hired are seasonal employees. He said that despite the labor shortage, travelers can expect to see ODOT maintenance crews clearing snow night and day.

“We will be keeping equipment on the road as much as possible,” he said.

Ace Clark, ODOT’s manager of District 13, which includes Union and Wallowa counties and most of Baker County, said that it has been difficult to hire road maintenance staff because

there is so much competition now for employees due to a regional and nationwide labor shortage. With everyone competing for employees, many employers are boosting their compensation packages.

“It is hard to recruit when everybody is paying more. It is hard to compete,” Clark said.

ODOT’s problem is compounded by the fact that the road maintenance employees it needs must be skilled drivers with commercial driver’s licenses. ODOT will provide the training needed to earn a CDL, but Clark said he would rather hire drivers who have experience operating heavy equipment before they start working in bad weather conditions.

Clark noted that all inexperienced drivers will be paired with experienced ones initially to help them develop skills.

“We will be taking them on training rides,” he said.

He noted it is possible that ODOT road maintenance employees from other parts of the state could be brought in this winter to help with snow removal.

Another concern of Clark’s is keeping a supply of replacement parts available for snowplows. This is important because replacement parts may be difficult to get quickly due to supply chain issues.

“We have been trying to stock up,” he said.

Clark said he has talented workers who have multiple skills and he is optimistic things will go relatively smoothly this winter.

“We are very fortunate because we have very good employees,” Clark said.

Safety first

Sipp said that anyone interested in working for ODOT this winter should contact the department.

“We want people to look to us for employment,” he said. “We want people who will enjoy doing this every day.”

Ken Patterson, area manager for ODOT’s Region 5, said motorists should be patient this winter since there may be times when snow will not be cleared as quickly as expected. He encourages people to avoid driving when conditions are poor. He said drivers should monitor ODOT’s

road cameras on its Trip Check website to make sure road conditions are good before they start a trip. Patterson noted that many additional cameras on I-84 between La Grande and Pendleton have been installed within the past two years.

Strandberg also pointed out that about a dozen message boards have been added between La Grande and Pendleton over the past two years. The message boards alert drivers to upcoming conditions, including the presence of snow, ice, fog, slow traffic and accidents. Strandberg also urges drivers to be patient and noted that it is never a good idea to pass a snowplow, especially because ODOT now has winged plows with blades on both sides. He said drivers who find themselves behind plows are actually in a good position.

“The best place you can be in a storm is behind a snowplow,” Strandberg said, adding that drivers should never get too close to snowplows because they do make stops.

This winter ODOT crews will again be following the agency’s Winter Levels of Service guidelines, which prioritize the roads that receive the most service. The guidelines indicate that Interstate 84 is to be given the highest priority in Union County, Strandberg said.

Energy and food costs push inflation up

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The annual inflation rate hit a 39-year high Friday, Dec. 10, as the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a year-over-year increase in the Consumer Price Index of 6.8%.

Energy and food prices led the way. Minus those two volatile categories, the inflation rate was 4.9%.

Central Washington orchardist April Clayton said her farm hasn’t benefited from higher food prices, but is paying more for fuel, chemical and labor.

“We’re not seeing the

increase in grocery stores reflected in returns on the farm,” she said. “Everything in the (supply) chain is going up, and it’s hitting us hard.”

The 6.8% inflation rate is the worst since June 1982. Other large contributors to inflation included housing, clothes, household furnishings, and new and used vehicles.

Energy costs overall rose 33%. Fuel oil rose 59%, gasoline 57.5% and electricity 6.5%.

Food prices increased 6.1%, with beef prices rising 20.9%, the most among major food categories.

Meat, poultry, fish and

eggs increased 12.8%, while fruits and vegetables rose 4%. Dairy products went up 1.6%.

President Biden blamed inflation on the global pandemic and said the Build Back Better Act would help families pay for health care and child care.

“For anyone who, like me, is concerned about costs facing American families, passing BBB is the most immediate and direct step we can take to deliver,” he said in a statement.

White House Economic Council Director Brian Deese and Deputy Directors Sameera Fazili and Bharat Ramamurti blamed meat packers for ris-

ing meat prices.

Tyson Foods, JBS Food and other meat-packers are profiting from an uncompetitive marketplace, the economic advisers claimed in a White House blog.

In response, the North American Meat Institute, which represents meat packers, said the White House was making a desperate bid to shift blame for inflation.

The Meat Institute said the White House was ignoring rising fuel costs, labor shortages and supply-chain problems.

“The White House Economic Council is again demonstrating its ignorance of agricultural economics and

the fundamentals of supply and demand,” Meat Institute President and CEO Julia Ann Potts said in a statement.

R-CALF CEO Bill Bullard, whose organization represents ranchers, endorsed the White House’s view. Cattle prices continue to slump, even as retail prices rise, he said.

“There is no question that the marketplace is broke and that the White House is correct,” Bullard said. “We are grateful that this administration has focused on this very serious problem.”

The CPI includes spending by 93% of the U.S. population, missing some rural residents and farm families.

Clayton, who operates an orchard with her husband, Mike, near Wenatchee, said the farm’s costs are rising faster than the 6.8% inflation rate.

Labor makes up about three-quarters of the orchard’s budget, and it must compete for workers with three larger nearby farms, she said. Piece-rate pay rises along with minimum wages guaranteed under state and federal laws, she said.

“All of this is having an effect on us,” Clayton said. Unlike some other manufacturers, farmers can’t pass on the costs, she said. “Unfortunately, in agriculture that’s not something we can do.”

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