

Trucker shortage puts drivers in high demand

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

If dozens of new, qualified truck drivers popped into Umatilla County tomorrow, Bryan Medelez argued they would have no problem finding jobs.

Good paying jobs. Medelez is the director of operations at his family's business, Medelez Inc. and BJK Transport, Hermiston, and they rely on lots of truck drivers.

"We know seed potato is right around the corner, so we'll be using 150 truck drivers," he said.

That would fill all the semis the company owns. Come the fall harvest, he said, the ranks of the business swell to 400, almost all of those are truck drivers. The company will contact the hundreds of drivers it keeps in a database and hire dozens of subcontractors to handle all the loads.

"There's certain times of the year that you better have all your trucks filled up because there's money to be made out there," Medelez said.

And that's the issue. According to the American Trucking Associations, the nation is short more than 50,000 truck drivers. The American Transportation Research Institute pegged the driver shortage as the top trucking industry concern for 2017 and 2018.

Bud Stephens teaches truck driving. He said he plans to reopen his driving school this spring in Hermiston because the need is there. He also said the shortage problem goes back for some time.

"We will never fill all the trucks that need drivers," he said, "and that's been going for at least 20 years, especially for long-haul drivers."

That is due to the lifestyle.



Michael Kennedy, a long-haul trucker who works for Medelez Trucking in Hermiston, checks his tires before heading to San Diego with a load of frozen french fries.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney



Michael Kennedy, a long-haul trucker who works for Medelez Trucking in Hermiston, drives his rig Wednesday in Hermiston. Later, he headed to San Diego with a load of frozen french fries.

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"Imagine," he said, "camping out the rest of your life, fighting everyday for parking ... not seeing your family, staying on the road two to four weeks at time."

The list goes on, he

said, but little of living on the road is attractive to most people. He also said changes in laws have made it easier to disqualify drivers while making it harder to be a driver. Washington, for example, Stephens said,

requires a minimum of 160 hours of driving time to get a commercial license. And the cost of the training can run a few thousand dollars.

Oregon does not require a minimum number of hours to enter the field, but

new drivers still have to go to school and pay plenty of fees. The knowledge test is \$10, the driving test is \$70, the certificate of test completion is \$40, the license is \$75 if you already have an Oregon driver's license and

\$135 if you don't.

Medelez said he sees truckers aging out of the workforce with no one to replace them as another major factor. According to the transportation institute's report, 28 percent of truck drivers are 55 and older, a situation putting "significant pressure on the industry to increase the available pool of qualified truck drivers."

One way to do that is provide better pay and benefits.

Medelez said his family's business offers a health insurance package, a 401K for retirement and an annual savings program in which the company matches 50 percent of an employee's contributions. He said that's a popular item for some extra Christmas cash.

And rookie drivers can make \$60,000 a year, Medelez said, while Walmart pays its drivers more than \$80,000. Drivers at Medelez and BJK can earn that, too, he said, "But you've got to hustle. It doesn't come easy."

Stephens said the competition is giving drivers freedom to pick where they want to work. Drivers are willing to jump from one company to the next if they see a better deal, he said, and companies need drivers so badly they overlook someone who may have left their last employer in the lurch.

Medelez said all the competition compounds the shortage. Large companies, small companies with just a handful of semis, even bus companies are looking for folks with the golden combination of a CDL and clean driving record. That's why Medelez and BJK keep on top of who they have available to handle big rigs.

"I think we manage it well," Medelez said. "We're here all the time."

Former Umatilla County drug boss out of jail after dismissal

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Carlos Joaquin Barragan of Hermiston used to run one of the largest illegal drug operations in northeast Oregon. Last week he was in jail on charges for stealing jewelry, which came in the wake of ripping off the Hermiston Classics Car Club.

Barragan's family made restitution to the club, and Umatilla County Circuit Judge Christopher Brauer on Friday dismissed the theft case. According to the court documents, the Umatilla County District Attorney's Office "failed to provide all discovery [reports, documents and other evidence] to the defense."

Brauer dismissed the case without prejudice, meaning the state can charge Barragan again.

Barragan, 40, in 2009 helped set up the largest illegal marijuana crop in Grant County, and in 2011 in federal court he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to manufacture and deliver more than 1,000 marijuana plants. He served almost six years in the federal prison in Sheridan and returned to Hermiston.

Police there arrested him Nov. 17 and booked him into the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton. Hermiston police Chief Jason Edmiston said Barragan is the subject of a drug possession case and the two theft cases, one involving the Hermiston Classics Car Club.

Larry Stormont was the recent club president and recalled Barragan as a "nice, friendly guy." They lived a couple doors apart, Barragan would visit when Stormont rolled out his 1955 pickup, and Barragan hung with Stormont's son, Richard Stormont, who state court records show has a criminal record. His last conviction was in 2008 for second-degree assault, a felony.

The car club needed a new treasurer,

Larry Stormont said, so he was handling the club's checkbook and one day tucked it away inside his desk at home after paying a club bill. He said that's when Barragan had access to the checkbook.

He took five checks from the book in early August, Stormont said, and wrote them for \$200 each and cashed four at a local bank machine.

"You can take checks to an ATM and 30 minutes later withdraw the money," he said, and Barragan did that four times. He gave the fifth check, Stormont said, to another guy who cashed it at a local credit union.

"That guy fled the country to Mexico, but Carlos they got," he said.

The Umatilla County District Attorney's Office charged Barragan on Nov. 19 with multiple counts of forgery and theft. His defense attorney, Herman Bylenga of Pendleton, filed to dismiss a month later because the parties reached a civil compromise. Stormont said Barragan's family made restitution and gave the club the \$1,000 it was out, and that's significant for the club's work.

"We give that money away," he said. "That's what we do with it. We give it away to some needy organizations around town."

Court records show Circuit Judge Christopher Brauer on Dec. 20 signed the motion to dismiss due to the restitution.

But the law was not done with Barragan. The district attorney on Dec. 23 charged him with first-degree theft. Edmiston said the charge stems from stealing jewelry worth more than \$1,000 in November from residents at the Country Squire Estates, the trailer park at 1500 N.E. 10th St.

The dismissal nixed that case and freed Barragan.

Edmiston said there remains the matter of the drugs Barragan had on him at the time of his arrest, but he has yet to face any related charges.



Barragan

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