

Economist talks growth at regional summit

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

Two emerging employers in Eastern Oregon sought to either fulfill or defy the region's economic projections Friday.

As a part of a presentation during the inaugural Eastern Oregon Economic Summit in Hermiston, Chris Rich, a regional economist for the Oregon Employment Department, explained to a room full of local business leaders and government officials at Hermiston High School how Eastern Oregon (which the state defines as Baker, Grant, Harney, Malheur, Morrow, Umatilla, Union, and Wallowa counties) was trending economically.

The employment department looked at various industries in the region and projected where they would be through 2027. They predict that there will be 7,500 jobs added to the economy during that time, and nearly nine out of 10 of those jobs will come from the private sector. Health services was expected to see the biggest increase, followed by transportation, warehousing, and utilities. Other growth industries include construction, manufacturing, and leisure and hospitality.

"Is that growth outrageous?" Rich said. "It's actually a little tame."



Business leaders from around the state gathered Friday for the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit at Hermiston High School.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney



At left, Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, speaks Friday during a Legislative panel at the economic summit. At right, Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, responds to a question during the summit at Hermiston High School. Smith is flanked by Rep. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and Rep. Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis.



He then flipped to a slide that showed that many of the anticipated growth industries had shown more dramatic growth from 2007 to now than their future projections.

Eastern Oregon has come a long way from the recession, when unemployment peaked at 7.9% and more than a third of the region's unemployed were without

work long term. Unemployment has now fallen to 5.1% and long-term unemployment has been cut in half.

With the economy recovered, representatives from

the lumber and drone industry highlighted their fields.

Lindsay Warness, the safety and environmental manager for Woodgrain Millwork, a Fruitland, Idaho, wood products manufacturer that recently bought lumber mills in Pilot Rock and La Grande, said she thought Woodgrain could play a role in the projected growth in the manufacturing sector.

"It's dirty work, but there's a lot of satisfaction and we get a lot done at the end of the day," she said.

Warness said the Northeast Oregon timber industry has been hit hard by environmental regulations, losing 1,800 jobs since 1997.

While the state's employment department didn't anticipate much growth in the region's tech industry, Ken Bisconer, the West Coast director of flight operations for PAE ISR, a Virginia-based defense contractor that tests its Resolute Eagle drone at the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range, was optimistic that PAE and its growing workforce would prove the projection wrong.

Bisconer said most of the people he works worth are ex-military, but he'd like to recruit more people outside the armed forces by training students in high school and Blue Mountain Community College.

"It's a job you can hang

your hat on," he said. "It's a retirement job."

Bisconer estimated that his employees contribute a total of \$80,000 to \$100,000 to Pendleton per month, and they could continue to do so as PAE prepares to bid on several nine- and 10-figure government contracts.

One area of the Eastern Oregon economy that isn't seeing growth is the number of young and middle-aged workers.

"As a share of the workforce, we're seeing a loss of the 45- to 54-year-olds in Eastern Oregon. That corresponds with changes in population as well," Rich said. "We're seeing older age groups work longer, but we're seeing a drop in the younger age groups."

While Rich said his presentation just scratched the surface of the data at the employment department's disposal, he made his pitch in front of an influential crowd.

In addition to government officials and business leaders, the audience for the daylong summit eventually swelled to include several legislators, the Oregon state treasurer, and former congressional candidate Jamie McLeod-Skinner. Panels during the event included topics such as water, infrastructure, housing, broadband and business recruitment.



Smoke billows from a fire that closed Highway 395 on Saturday and burned multiple structures.

Contributed photo by Bernie Sanderson

Fire burns vehicles, two homes

HERMISTON HERALD

A grass fire along Highway 395 in Hermiston burned several vehicles and two homes on Saturday morning.

Umatilla County Fire District 1 was first to respond to the blaze, which was between Theater Lane and Punkin Center Road, shortly after 10 a.m. The fire was under control by 1:40 p.m. Umatilla, Irrigon, Boardman and Pilot Rock rural fire protection districts offered mutual aid.

Umatilla County Fire District Chief Scott Stanton said the fire was likely caused by an illegal burn on a nearby property.

"When it's hot and windy like that the probability of an ignition is up to 90 to 100%," he said. "That's why we have the burning season closure."

Stanton said firefighters faced access problems

when trying to contain the fire as it spread from one residence to another.

The fire caused closures on Highway 395 for several hours. No major injuries were reported, but the department did report two "minor medical issues" resulting from the incident. According to a Facebook post by UCFD1, Lt. Jeremy Gillette, who was off duty at the time, was driving past when the fire first started and was able to evacuate a disabled resident who would not have been able to leave on her own.

The fire district also put out a tractor and grass fire that was reported shortly before 5:30 p.m. Sunday on Brown Lane near East Loop Road in Hermiston.

The cause is under investigation, and Stanton said that the fire district is unsure whether the fire initiated on the tractor, or on the surrounding land.

The fire district also responded to a railroad fire shortly after 1 a.m. Monday near Cascade Street in Hermiston. Stanton said it appeared that several railroad ties had caught fire, and the fire was contained.

Police investigating death after man's body found

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Hermiston police are investigating the death of a man after a transient discovered the body.

Brandon Smith said he is homeless and late Friday was walking the edge of the One Stop Mart at 1050 S. Highway 395, Hermiston, looking for cans or loose cash when he passed the air machine at the service station and headed up a small path to the back of the bushes.

"I took a few steps into the bushes and saw a person with bad scratches and blood," Smith stated in a social media message to the *East Oregonian*.

Smith said he thought a person was sleeping, so he yelled and asked if they needed help. When no reply came, he said, he called 911 and reported he found a body or an injured person.

Hermiston police Chief Jason Edmiston confirmed officers at approximately 10:50 p.m. responded to that call and found the body in a thicket of shrubs.

"The 34-year old deceased male has been identified," Edmiston stated, "but due to the state of decomposition, our agency is withholding additional information from public release until an autopsy is conducted."

Edmiston added that likely will take place early next week.

Smith also said he had a probation violation hearing earlier that day, but the judge postponed the sentencing so he could present evidence he was following the probation requirements. If the judge had not postponed the hearing, Smith said, he would have been in jail for 30 days and not have found the body.

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