


Fresno County unemployment dips to 12.1%; ag hiring leads way

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By Tim Sheehan

Fresno County's unemployment rate fell in April, buoyed by a large monthly gain in agricultural jobs and lesser growth in several other industry sectors.

Despite the improvement, however, the county's jobless rate of 12.1% last month remains higher than the state figure of 7.8% and the national average of 6.3%, according to data released Friday by the California Employment Development Department.

And a former EDD director pointed out that the raw statistics don't reveal the quality of work being found.

April marked the 34th consecutive month in which Fresno County's unemployment rate was lower than the same time a year earlier -- a sign of continued, albeit slow and fragile, improvement in the region's economy. A year ago, in April 2013, the jobless rate was reported at 13.2%. Last month also reflected a sharp drop from the 13.8% unemployment reported in March.

Unemployment estimates in neighboring central San Joaquin Valley counties for April were:

Kings County: 13.1%, down from 14.8% in March and down from 14.1% in April 2013.

Madera County: 11.2%, down from 12.6% in March and down from 12.0% in April 2013.

Merced County: 14.3%, down from 16.3% in March and down from 15.7% in April 2013.

Tulare County: 13.4%, down from 15.6% in March and down from 13.6% in April 2013.

"This was the lowest April unemployment rate since April 2008, when it was 9.7%," said Steven Gutierrez, a labor market consultant with the state EDD. "Unemployment typically drops this time of year due to an influx of farm jobs, and historically April is the start of an uptick in employment throughout the area with agriculture and other industries."

Gutierrez added that the start of baseball season and springtime in the region's national parks seemed to spark a surge in employment in the leisure/hospitality sector.

The state estimated the number of out-of-work job seekers in the county at 54,200. That's down from about 62,200 in March, and compares favorably to the 59,300 unemployed reported in April 2013. Total employment in Fresno County was reported at more than 392,000.

Similar trends showed up in neighboring central San Joaquin Valley counties, all reporting unemployment rates that were lower than the prior month and year.

California's unemployment rate has dipped below 8% for the first time in nearly six years, the EDD reported. The last time the state's jobless rate was at this level was in September 2008, when the rate was 7.9%. A year ago, California's jobless rate stood at 9.1%.

Nationally, the unemployment rate of 6.3% was also the lowest rate since it was at 6.1% in September 2008.

Still, nearly 1.5 million Californians remain out of work, including 112,500 people in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Expert digs deeper

The positive numbers can be deceptive, said Michael Bernick, a former EDD director who is now a fellow at the Milken Institute economic think tank based in Santa Monica.

Bernick said the addition of 56,000 jobs across California for the month does not necessarily reflect what is happening in the labor market. Many employees now work part-time, on contract or on a specific project and then move on, he said. That means they lack the stability and long-term benefits of traditional full-time jobs.

"It's not the stable, long-term employment," he said. "It's a different type of employment, but it's still counted if you're hired 20 hours a week, if you're hired as a project employee."

In Fresno County, the number of farm jobs reported by employers grew by 7,500 between March and April, reflecting a normal seasonal swing as agriculture ramps up in the spring and summer. But farms also had about 2,700 fewer workers than they did the same time a year ago, Gutierrez said.

Retail continued to show year-over-year improvement, with about 2,100 more jobs than a year ago for four consecutive months of gains. "And in another indicator of recovery, construction added 900 jobs from a year ago and reached the highest April total since 2009," Gutierrez said. "That's a little over two years of year-over-year growth."

But with about 13,700 people employed in construction last month, the industry remains well below where it was during the peak of the housing boom in 2005. In April 2005, more than 22,000 worked in construction in Fresno County. "I don't know if we'll ever get back to that range again," Gutierrez said. "But we are starting to see more housing developments out there and construction workers taking care of business."

Among all industry sectors in the county, only manufacturing saw a year-over-year dip in employment from April 2013.

Unemployment rates are calculated based on the number of people who want jobs but cannot find work. They do not, however, count people who are not considered part of the labor force, including retirees, students or "discouraged" workers -- often the long-term unemployed who are not actively looking for work "because they believed no jobs were available for them or there were none for which they would qualify," according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

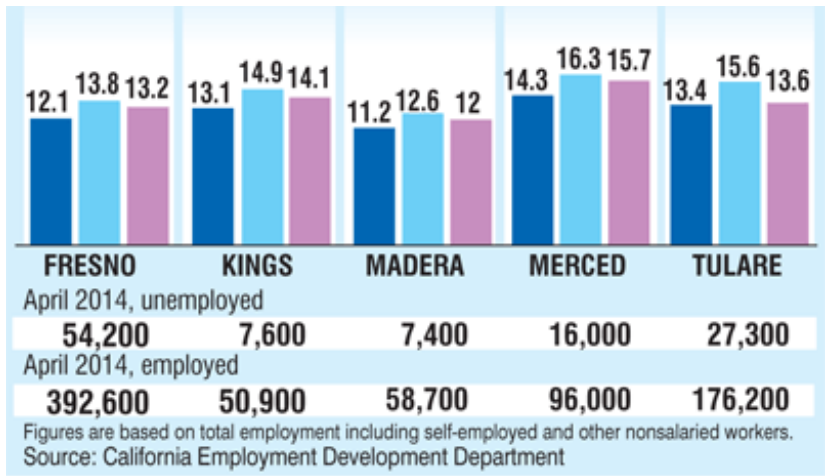
Nationally, the number of discouraged workers is estimated at 783,000, with another 1.4 million people not working because of illness, family responsibilities or because they are in school or training.

Additionally, nearly 7.2 million people in the U.S. are holding down more than one job.

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**Monthly unemployment
in Valley counties**
Percent unemployed

■ April 2014
■ March 2014
■ April 2013



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