

Fresno County unemployment dips to near 12%; ag hiring leads way in Valley

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By Tim Sheehan

Farm workers carry ladders to the next area during the mandarin orange harvest in February 2012 near Sanger.

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Fresno County's unemployment rate fell in April, buoyed by a large monthly gain in agricultural jobs and smaller 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 and nearly twice the national average, according to data released Friday by the state Employment Development Department.

April marked the 34th consecutive month in which Fresno County's unemployment rate was lower than the same time a year earlier -- a prospective 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.

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.

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.

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

California's unemployment rate in April dipped below 8% for the first time in nearly six years, the EDD reported. California's jobless rate for April was 7.8%. It was last at that level in September 2008, when the rate was 7.9%.

A year ago, California's jobless rate stood at 9.1%.

Nationally, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated the unemployment rate at 6.3% -- also the lowest rate since it was 6.1% in September 2008.

-- This story will be updated.

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