

Construction projected as Fresno's fastest-growing job sector through 2022

By Tim Sheehan



The construction industry, still struggling to regain its prerecession footing, is expected to be the fastest-growing employment sector in Fresno County into the early 2020s, according to new 10-year employment projections from the state Employment Development Department. JOHN WALKER — The Fresno Bee | [Buy Photo](#)

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Fastest growth and most openings

- A recent state jobs projection for 2012-2022 indicates that the construction industry in Fresno County will generate about 4,600 new jobs in the decade, representing about 38% growth.

- Farm labor is forecast to have the largest number of job openings over the 10-year period, at 13,470.

- None of the four occupations with the most projected job openings from 2012 to 2022 — farm labor, personal care aides, cashiers, and fast-food preparers and servers — require a high school diploma. All four have a median hourly wage of under \$10.

Education, opportunities
A new projection of employment patterns through 2022 indicates that the greatest number of job openings in Fresno County will be in fields requiring the least levels of educational attainment — and on the lowest rung of the occupational ladder.

Education/level	Median wage (per hour)	Openings (range/2012)
No high school diploma	\$7.19	6,304
High school diploma/GED	\$8.23	4,600
Some college, no degree	\$10.42	808



The construction industry, still struggling to regain its prerecession footing, is expected to be the fastest-growing employment sector in Fresno County into the early 2020s, according to new 10-year employment projections from the state Employment Development Department.

But even with job growth in construction projected at almost 38% over the 10-year period from 2012 to 2022 — a net gain of about 4,600 workers from 12,200 in 2012 to 16,800 in 2022 — the industry would remain below its historic high-water mark during the housing boom before the recession. In 2006, about 23,200 people worked in construction before the roof caved in on the industry and the economy.

While construction is anticipated to see the greatest percentage growth, the largest number of job openings — through both industry growth and replacement of people who retire or leave jobs — will be in occupations requiring the least education and offering some of the lowest pay rates in the Valley. That's a pattern that historically holds true in Fresno County's agriculture- and service-based economy, said Steven Gutierrez, an EDD labor market analyst in Fresno.

"Ever since I've been on board, farm workers show the most job openings, and retail cashiers and fast-food. It always seems to be the entry-level positions that are on the top of these lists," Gutierrez said.

The EDD projections, based on surveys of employers in counties up and down the state, indicate that total employment in Fresno County will rise from about 369,300 in 2012 to 426,900 in 2022. That amounts to 57,600 more jobs, or overall net growth of 15.6% over the course of the decade.

By the time you figure in hiring of replacement employees to fill existing positions, EDD projects a total of almost 153,000 job openings to be filled — across all levels of skill, education and pay — at some time during the 2012-2022 decade.

But a deeper look at the numbers shows that more than 63,000 of the expected openings will be for jobs that don't require a high school diploma, while almost 48,000 openings are in occupations that in 2014 paid a median hourly wage — the point at which half of workers earn more and half earn less — under \$10.

"Farmworkers and laborers, crop, nursery and greenhouse, are expected to far exceed the number of openings in any other occupation," the EDD reported, estimating nearly 13,500 openings. "Job openings will primarily be due to replacement needs because of the seasonal nature of the work." Farm labor jobs have a median hourly wage of \$9.02, or less than \$19,000 a year.

Rounding out the top five specific occupations with the most projected job openings are:

- Personal care aides, 6,490 openings, median hourly wage of \$9.01.
- Cashiers, 5,080 openings, median hourly wage of \$9.71.
- Food prep/servers, including fast food, 4,700 openings, median hourly wage of \$9.11.
- Retail salespeople, 4,510 openings, median hourly wage of \$10.25.

"General and operations managers is the only occupation among the top 10 that has an entry education level higher than a high school diploma, which will have a median annual salary of \$86,881," according to the state report.

Within the construction industry, there are a range of specific occupations that are each tallied separately, from construction managers to general laborers. Among construction managers, for which there are expected to be 330 openings in the 10-year forecast period, the median hourly wage was tabbed at almost \$41. Collectively, the rest of the construction-related occupations are expected to have about 5,600 openings — a combination of new jobs and

replacement positions — with a median hourly wage of \$19.20.

“2006 is when we topped out in construction employment,” EDD’s Gutierrez said. “Between 2007 and 2011, we saw negative growth each year. But now we’ve seen three years of year-over-year growth here in Fresno.”

As the broader Valley economy recovers, it is fueling renewed activity in home building and commercial construction, and more homeowners appear to be hiring contractors for remodeling or home repairs that they may have been putting off when money was tighter, he added. “And I don’t know if the dry winters we’ve had in the last couple of years has anything to do with it, but if you look at the national and state level as well, we’re seeing good things happening in construction.”

The EDD’s long-term projections roughly align with the short-term expectations from a 2012 Fresno County Employment Survey conducted by the Fresno Regional Workforce Investment Board. That report, based on a survey of employers in the county, also projected farm labor as the occupation with the most openings in 2015, at nearly 1,200.

Collectively, the varied construction-related occupations in the Workforce Investment Board survey accounted for a forecast of just over 1,000 job openings in 2015.

The current labor environment nationwide looks marginally better than it has in years, according to an analysis issued Wednesday by the Washington, D.C.-based Economic Policy Institute. EPI senior economist Elise Gould said that in December, the ratio of job seekers to available job openings was 1.7-to-1, the lowest it’s been since November 2007 in the early stages of the recession. The EPI analysis is based on federal reports of job openings and labor turnover and population surveys.

“This slight decline in the job-seekers-to-job-openings ratio is a continuation of its steady decrease, since its high of 6.8-to-1 in July 2009,” Gould said Wednesday. “If the economy were stronger, the ratio would be even smaller — a 1-to-1 ratio would mean that there were roughly as many job openings as job seekers — but this indicates that we are moving in the right direction.”

Across the country, almost every industry segment except for private-sector health and social services still has more unemployed people than job openings, according to the EPI analysis. The construction industry, while growing, continues to suffer. The U.S. averaged about 760,000 unemployed construction workers in 2014, compared to about 130,000 job openings in the industry. “There are still about six unemployed construction workers for every job opening,” Gould said. “In other words, despite claims from some employers, there is no shortage of construction workers.”

“Taken as a whole,” she added, “these numbers demonstrate that the main problem in the labor market is a broad-based lack of demand for workers — not available workers lacking the skills needed for the sectors with job openings.”

Contact Tim Sheehan: tsheehan@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6319 or [@TimSheehanNews](https://twitter.com/TimSheehanNews) on Twitter.

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