

Fresno County unemployment dips in February, continues year-over-year improvement

By Tim Sheehan



The Internal Revenue Service processing center in Fresno is shown in a file photo. Some of Fresno County's job growth in February was attributed to the federal government ramping up seasonal hiring at the center. FRESNO BEE FILE

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February's unemployment rate of 11.6% was an improvement from the same month the year before, and showed a good drop from January because of substantial job growth in several major industry sectors.



The monthly jobless rate released Friday by the state Employment Development Department was down from 12% in January and compares favorably with the rate of 13.7% reported in February 2014. The year-over-year improvement represents more than 3 1/2 years in which monthly jobless rates have either been stable or lower than the same month a year earlier.



“These estimates follow the region’s normal seasonal trends where we have higher unemployment in the winter months,” said Steven Gutierrez, an EDD labor market analyst in Fresno.

Farm jobs fell by about 300 between January and February — part of a typical seasonal swoon in the Valley. “This is when we see the lull in farming and food processing,” Gutierrez said. “If the historic job patterns hold, unemployment will peak in this first quarter” before showing even greater improvement in the spring.

Government was the employment sector with the largest net gain in jobs from January to February, adding about 2,400 jobs. Local government agencies such as counties, cities and school districts saw their employee ranks rise by about 1,400, while federal agencies added about 1,100. State offices lost about 100 jobs.

Other sectors reporting significant job growth were professional/business services — specialties such as legal, accountancy, engineering, scientific, waste management and other technical services for business clients — with a gain of about 1,100 jobs; private-sector health/education services, about 900 jobs; and financial activities including banking, insurance and real estate, about 400 jobs.

Gutierrez attributed some of the job growth to the arrival of income tax season, with the federal government ramping up seasonal hiring for the Internal Revenue Service processing center in Fresno, and tax-preparation businesses adding tax preparers to handle more business ahead of the April 15 tax-filing deadline.

The EDD reported month-to-month and year-over-year improvements in the unemployment rates in neighboring central San Joaquin Valley counties, ranging from 11.2% in Madera County to 13.5% in Merced County.

On a year-over-year basis, farming was the only industry sector to report a loss of jobs since February 2014, Gutierrez said.

Employers in Fresno County’s manufacturing industry reported 800 more jobs than a year earlier. “They reached the highest February total since 2007,” Gutierrez said. The sector, which includes producers of durable goods as well as food processing, had about 22,900 jobs on its payrolls last month.

“This year has started well for manufacturers because we’ve had two months of year-over-year growth,” Gutierrez said. “Manufacturing has seen negative growth for quite some time, but if we see another positive month in March, it will be the first time in quite a while that we’ve seen a full quarter of growth.”

Retailers reported having 2,200 more jobs last month in their stores than they did in February 2014. “Hopefully that means that people have a little more discretionary income in their pockets, allowing retail to grow a little bit,” Gutierrez said.

The number of people working in Fresno County last month climbed to nearly 392,000, while those out of work dipped to 51,400. The unemployment figures, however, don’t include people who have dropped out of the labor force, either through retirement, for school or due to giving up their search for work.

The statewide unemployment rate for California fell to 6.7% in February, down from 7% in January. Nationally, the U.S. unemployment rate dropped to 5.5% last month.

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