

March unemployment down in most of Valley

By Tim Sheehan



MIKE GROLL — SPECIAL TO THE BEE

-
-

Unemployment rates fell in four of five central San Joaquin Valley counties between February and March, and the region continued its longer-range trend of year-over-year improvement in the jobless rate.



Figures released Friday by the state Employment Development Department show that Fresno County’s unemployment rate fell to 11.2%. That is the lowest March unemployment rate reported for the county since 2008. It’s down from 11.6% in February and 2.7 percentage points lower than the 13.9% reported a year ago.



The improvement comes from an increase in nonfarm jobs across the county. Employers reported adding 2,600 positions between February and March, even as farm jobs fell by 500. Among the industries reporting gains were private-sector education and health services, growing by about 1,200 jobs. Trade/transportation/utilities added about 800 positions during the month, while government gained 500 jobs, apparently buoyed by seasonal hiring for the Internal Revenue Service processing center in Fresno as tax time approached.

“In the month-over figures, education and health services hasn’t had a gain of more than 1,000 jobs since January

2013,” said Steven Gutierrez, a labor market analyst with the EDD in Fresno. “And in year-over-year growth, Fresno County seems to be off to a good start this year with good first-quarter growth in trade/transportation/utilities, professional/business services, manufacturing and other industry subsectors.”

Fresno County has experienced year-over-year improvements in its unemployment rate for 42 consecutive months.

Professional and business services — an industry category that includes specialties such as legal, accountancy, engineering, scientific, waste management and other technical services for business clients — added about 3,900 jobs between March 2014 and March 2015. Through the first three months of the year, he added, “the sector has gained 11,700 jobs” over 2014.

Manufacturing is also looking bright so far this year. “Manufacturing has added about 2,300 jobs in the quarter” compared to 2014, Gutierrez said. “That’s the best first quarter of the year for manufacturing since 2005.”

And there have been steady year-over-year gains in retail of at least 2,000 jobs in January, February and March compared to 2014. “That looks like it bodes well for retailers heading into the spring because consumers seem to have a little more discretionary income in their pockets,” Gutierrez said.

The gains have been offset somewhat by month-to-month and year-to-year declines in farm jobs. Between February and March, farms reported 500 fewer jobs, and a loss of about 2,500 jobs compared to March 2014. “It’s part of a normal seasonal trend that we see in agriculture,” Gutierrez said. “The first quarter is when we see the unemployment rate at its highest peak, but April tends to be the beginning of the farm season and we’ll see an uptick in farm jobs.”

About 39,300 Fresno County farm jobs were counted last month, down from 41,800 a year ago. But it’s too early, Gutierrez added, to get a handle on how California’s ongoing drought may affect farm employment this spring and summer: “We won’t be able to compare until we see what April looks like” in relation to prior years.

Across Fresno, Kings, Madera, Merced and Tulare counties, about 766,100 people were employed in March. The number of unemployed was estimated at 105,900.

Statewide, the jobless rate was 6.5% in March, down from 6.7% in February and the third straight month of decline this year. The last time California’s unemployment rate was this low was in May 2008. The national unemployment rate remained unchanged at 5.5%. But the official unemployment figures for counties, the state or nation make no distinction between whether people working had full- or part-time work, nor do they factor in people who have dropped out of the labor force and are not looking for work — including “discouraged” workers who have given up their job hunt.

Nationwide, the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that among more than 6 million people who want a job but are not in the labor force, about 738,000 have become discouraged over job prospects and believe there is no job available for them. The federal agency reported that by the time discouraged workers are counted, as well as the “underemployed” — people who want full-time work but have only found part-time jobs — and people who are only marginally counted in the available labor force, the combined rate of unemployment and underemployment in California last year was 15.2%. That’s more than double the official state unemployment rate of 7.5% for 2014.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Contact Tim Sheehan: tsheehan@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6319 or [@TimSheehanNews](https://twitter.com/TimSheehanNews) on Twitter.