

# Fresno Co. jobless rate inches down

Posted at 11:44 PM on Friday, Jun. 18, 2010

By Tim Sheehan / The Fresno Bee

Unemployment fell slightly in California in May, but the agricultural harvest and fruit-packing season drove more substantial declines across the central San Joaquin Valley.

In Fresno County, a gain of about 6,400 farm jobs sent the May unemployment rate to 15.9%, down from 16.9% in April. But that's well above the May 2009 rate of 14.3%, according to figures made public Friday by the state Employment Development Department.

"This is normally the dip we're going to see, because that's the way the seasonal hiring patterns work," said Steven Gutierrez, a labor market analyst for the state. "From now to about October, we'll see farming be the lead, and we'll see increases in manufacturing as well because of the food packing and manufacturing here."

Unemployment rates also fell in neighboring Valley counties, with Madera County the lowest at 15%.

Despite the improvement, joblessness in the Valley remains well above state and national levels. In Fresno, Kings, Madera, Merced and Tulare counties, an estimated 188,200 people who want jobs were out of work in May, compared to 126,600 a year ago.

Across California, the unemployment rate in May was 12.4%, down from 12.5% in April.

While farm jobs represented the biggest segment of growth between April and May, Fresno County also registered increases in manufacturing -- mostly due to a surge of activity in food processing and packing that corresponds to the summer harvest, Gutierrez said -- and government.

Employment in the county's construction industry rose to about 12,200 -- a meager increase of 200 in May, far fewer new jobs than in a normal year, Gutierrez said. "Everything related to housing and consumer spending, construction and retail trade, continues to lag," he said. "Construction normally leads the way out of recession, but that's not happening this time."

The federal Labor Department reported Friday that California was among 37 states and the District of Columbia where unemployment fell in May. Six states had increases and seven saw no change.

Forty-one states and the District of Columbia saw a net increase in non-farm jobs. But that reflected national data showing a huge gain because of government hiring of temporary census workers.

Of those states reporting non-farm job increases, the gains were led by the big states. Texas saw a rise of 43,600, California was up 28,300 and New York had an increase of 21,000 jobs.

Nationally, unemployment dropped to 9.7% in May from 9.9% in April. But the decline was largely because hundreds of thousands of jobless people stopped searching for work.

A total of 431,000 new jobs were added across the country in May, the biggest gain in a decade. Still, the surge came from 411,000 temporary census jobs. Private-sector job growth slowed significantly.