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Local unemployment rate in double digits

Joblessness highest in
14 years

BY KATI O'HARE
DAILY PRESS WRITER

MONTROSE — Montrose County's unemployment rate has accelerated to 10.3 percent, hitting double digits for the first time in 14 years, reports the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment.

That's worse than the average rate for the nation, for the state and for surrounding counties. But it's also a reflection of continued financial distress across the country, said Joe Winter, senior economist for the state labor department.

Montrose County's January unemployment rate shows that slowed economic activity at the local, state and national levels are affecting the Montrose area, Winter said.

Although unemployment usually is high in winter, because cold weather keeps contractors and farmers inside, it's "compounded by less money and less financial resources," he said.

And when less money is spent, it's felt almost everywhere.

"Construction has slowed, and the amount of money in the Western Slope has slowed down because of the oil and gas industry," Winter said. "There is less money in the system, and money is like the gas and oil for a motor: It doesn't run well without either."

The Montrose County unemployment rate of 10.3 percent is unadjusted for seasonal variances, such as ranching and farming. Still, it's higher than

unadjusted rates in neighboring counties:

- Mesa County's rate was 10.2 percent in January.
- Delta County's rate was 9.1 percent.
- And Ouray County's rate was 8.1 percent.

Even the state's unadjusted unemployment rate was at 8.2 percent — a full 2.1 percent lower than the rate in Montrose County.

The national unemployment rate in January was 9.7 percent, but that number is seasonally adjusted. If unadjusted, it would be higher.

The last time Montrose County's unemployment rate was nearly this high was in January 1996, when unemployment was at 10.1 percent. The 20-year high was 12.1 percent in February 1992.

Today, more than 2,000 Montrose County residents — in a labor force of 20,000 — are unemployed, the state labor department reports.

That includes 30 workers who lost their jobs when Downey Excavation Inc. closed in January.

The demise of the company was Hideout Lake, said Marcus Dean, one of four Downey owners. Hideout Lake, a mountain golf community southwest of Montrose, could not pay Downey for work it did, nor could it pay for future work promised to the company, he said.

"We were very heavily invested in that project," said Dean. "We were never able to recover. We fought to keep going until we got that money so we could continue, but we ran out of options as far as cash flow. And it got to



JOEL BLOCKER / DAILY PRESS

Brad Ryser, an employee with S&R Plumbing, background, holds a roof drain pipe against the wall, while Brandon Roberts drills it into place for the Montrose Aquatic Center in November 2008, before the nation recession eradicated much construction and other employment.

the point that we could not make payroll. So we decided to shut it down."

Downey Excavation has a mechanic's lien foreclosure against

Pacific Desert Partners LLC, owners of Hideout Lake, for \$650,000 — the cost of the work completed. A trial is scheduled for July, Dean said.

In Montrose, "We have, over the last year and a half, continued to decline in sales and use tax," said City Manager Mary Watt. "This is the result of less construction and people not spending enough in our economy because of their household concerns."

So many more people now are seeking government assistance.

More than 2,000 households — 11 percent of homes here — were receiving food stamps as of Dec. 31, according to Montrose County Health and Human Services.

The number of households on food stamps increased an average of 40 per month through 2009. By January, Montrose County ranked No. 6 among Colorado's 64 counties for the highest percentage of food-stamp recipients.

LEAP applications also have increased. The federally funded Low-Income Energy Assistance Program helps families with heating and cooling bills. The county received more LEAP applications in November and December 2009 than in the entire six-month span from November 2007 through April 2008.

As families struggle with financial difficulties, the city also tightens its budget to deal with declining revenues.

The city has delayed capital improvement projects, adding to the construction slow-down. Watt said a few projects are scheduled for 2010, and, under a new "local preference" ordinance, those projects should go to local businesses and spur local job growth, she said.

For some companies, however, it's too late.

Uncompahgre River spotlighted on TV show

BY MATT LINDBERG
DAILY PRESS WRITER

MONTROSE — A Telluride fisherman is letting the nation know about one of the Western Slope's best-kept secrets — the Uncompahgre River.

Frank Smethurst, of Telluride, is the host of the Trout Unlimited's "On The Rise." He travels the American countryside to showcase great fly fishing and trout settings for his show.

"On the Rise" filmed an episode in Montrose this week, showcasing the Uncompahgre for its upcoming fourth season. The episode will air May 24 on the Sportsman Channel.

"The Uncompahgre River has potential to be one of the West's best rivers," Smethurst said. "It's a good fishery that can be a great fishery. It's already pretty impressive."

Still, the Uncompahgre River needs better regulation and better flows, Smethurst said. He said some of the "best" fish flow through the Uncompahgre from the South Canal, but fishermen take them rather than putting them back after a catch, making it difficult to fish on the Uncompahgre in the spring. The show will include segments about these issues.

The episode was shot at the Double Diamond River Ranch, Riverbottom Park and the Pacochu-puk on the Uncompahgre,



KIRK DAHLE/COURTESY PHOTO

"On The Rise" host Frank Smethurst shows off a trout he caught during a taping of his show on the Bear River in Idaho. The episode will air later this spring.

below the Ridgway Reservoir.

The episode's opening segment was shot in Telluride, in which Smethurst and his brother have a snowboard competition. The winner got the first cast on the Uncompahgre.

Smethurst was raised in Atlanta and began fly-fishing at age 6 under the mentorship of Ron Curry, an early pioneer of saltwater fly-fishing in Florida. For several years, Smethurst

worked at a fishing shop, "Fish Hawk," before attending the University of Georgia.

After graduating college with a degree in radio, television and film production, he moved to Telluride in 1989 and became a fishing guide. He pursued his studies while he fished, appearing in the film "Running Down The Man" and winning the 2004 Fly Fishing Masters along with teammate Giff Maytham. He placed third in the same event in 2003.

"He's a professional fly fisherman and has an amazing passion," said Erin Mooney, press secretary for Trout Unlimited.

Traveling to fishing spots across the country is exciting, but it was great to film an episode on "home turf," Smethurst said.

"The Uncompahgre and the Black Canyon of Gunnison are my home rivers," he said. "It was a natural story for the show, because Montrose is sitting on a gold mine. I'd like to keep it a fishing secret, but the priority is make people aware and improve the river."

The new season of "On The Rise" begins March 29. The Sportsman Channel is channel 416 for Bresnan Communications television subscribers, channel 605 for DIRECT TV subscribers and 285 for Dish subscribers.

Colorado secretary of state visits Montrose

Buescher touts local successes

BY KATHARHYNN HEIDELBERG
DAILY PRESS SENIOR WRITER

MONTROSE — In just a few years, Montrose County went from the Colorado Secretary of State's elections watch list to a contributor for the office's new "best practices and vision" commission.

"My job is chief election officer," Secretary of State Bernie Buescher said during his brief visit to Montrose on Wednesday. He pledged to ensure a clean process to protect elections and to continue working with county clerks' offices across the state.

Buescher praised Montrose for recent innovations, including a new ballot-delivery process on Election Day.

Montrose Clerk and Recorder Fran Tipton Long implemented multiple-ballot delivery procedures last election. At designated times, a transfer judge would bring in voted ballots, following all required security procedures and protocols.

Having elections officials turn in results periodically on Election Day increases accountability, Long and Buescher said. The procedure makes it easier to spot aberrations and enables final results to be determined much sooner than if the votes were turned in all at once.

"It's a win-win situation for Montrose County," Long said. "We had, I would say, three times the accuracy when it came to the (vote) canvass."

Buescher said he plans to incorporate Montrose's strategy as part of his best practices commission, and he hopes other counties will consider it. "We can all learn from each other," he said.

Montrose hasn't always won praise from the secretary of state. In 2006, problems with programming of the county's

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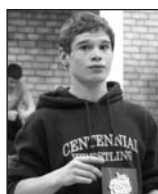
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wins tournament
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TODAY'S WEATHER

Mostly sunny in the morning then becoming partly sunny. Highs 55 to 65. West winds 10 to 15 mph in the afternoon. See details, Page A17



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