

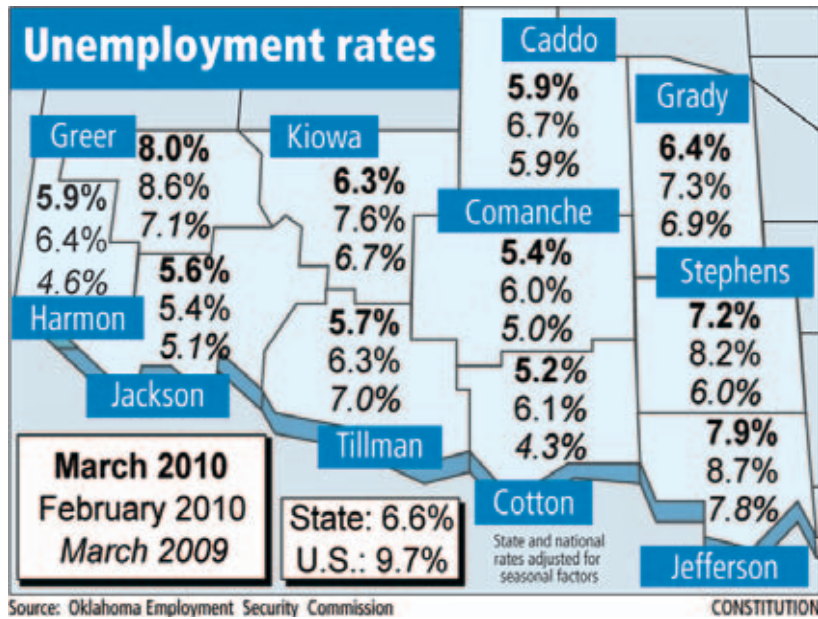
Southeast counties have highest jobless rates in Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Southeastern Oklahoma has the highest rates of unemployment in the state.

The four highest jobless rates when broken down by county are Latimer (11.2 percent), McCurtain (10.8 percent), Sequoyah (10.8 percent) and Hughes (10.4 percent).

The counties with the lowest unemployment rates were Beaver (3.4 percent), Harper (3.7 percent) and Woods (3.8 percent).

The statewide jobless rate was 6.6 percent in March.



Source: Oklahoma Employment Security Commission

Area jobless rate falls

THE CONSTITUTION STAFF

Unemployment rates appear to be subsiding across much of Southwestern Oklahoma, according to the most recent statistics from the state Employment Security Commission.

The commission reported that jobless rates fell from February to March in all but one of the region's 11 counties, and rates were lower than a year ago in three counties.

Comanche County's rate, which spiked at 6 percent in February, slipped to 5.4 percent. The commission estimated that the labor force grew by 90 people over the

month while employment jumped by 330.

There was more good news in the separate report on nonfarm wage and salary employment estimate, which put Comanche County's nonfarm employment at 44,200, a gain of 1,000 from February and 700 from March 2009.

The dip in the local jobless rate put the Lawton metropolitan area back in the top 10 among the 372 metros tracked by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Lawton was tied for 9th lowest; Oklahoma City was tied for 28th, Tulsa placed in a tie for 64th and Wichita Falls, Texas, was tied for 80th.

Retailers ready for energy stimulus

Many expect rebates to be exhausted on Saturday

By MIKE ANDREWS
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When Lawton's Lowe's store opens at 7 a.m. Saturday, manager Bob McDonald expects a line to start forming. By the time appliance rebates become available for energy-efficient appliances at 9 a.m. that day, he expects there to be a mob at least equal to the one that comes after Thanksgiving for the traditional Black Friday sales.

"We don't have a clue how quickly these rebates will go, but it will be first come, first served," McDonald said. "We're just going to make sure everyone has fun and no one gets hurt."

The concerns about overwhelming the system are well-founded. When Texas opened up its phone lines and computers April 7 to take reservations for \$23 million in rebates to replace old refrigerators and washing machines with Energy Star-rated appliances, the system crashed. Within eight hours all the funds were gone.

The lessons learned from Texas' experience helped Oklahoma come up with a different way of disbursing its \$3.5 million in rebate funds.

"We've talked to other states on conference call," said Vaughn Clark of the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, which administers the program. "Some states had major problems with people flooding their system with reservations."

That's why Oklahoma decided to let retailers reserve the rebates for their customers.

This is the way it will work, according to Clark.

A consumer who wants to replace an older model appliance to a Energy Star-rated appliance should show up at an approved retailer Saturday morning. At 9 a.m. the retailer will be able to go online to reserve a rebate. After providing some information for the online form, the purchaser will receive a verification form with a number (if the form is lost, it may be reprinted if you keep up with your number). The customer will have to confirm on the form that the old appliance was hauled away. That can be done by a retailer's delivery and haul-away service, by a municipal recycling center or dump or, if all else fails, by a customer affirming on the form that the appliance was taken away. A rebate check should come back in the mail four to six weeks after the verification form is mailed in.

The fact that hundreds of retailers will be on computers reserving rebates Saturday morning instead of hundreds of thousands of consumers should keep the system from crashing, Clark said.

As for how long the rebates will be available, there are no guarantees the money will last longer than Saturday.

"There is some expectation there may be early subscription of the funds," Clark said. "So you need to go on May 8, but the funds will be available until they're used up."

A rush of customers is exactly what Brian Gosnell, manager of Rains Furniture TV & Appliance expects. "We're expecting a large

How the program works

- Beginning 9 a.m. May 8, a consumer can walk into a registered Oklahoma retailer to make an appliance purchase.
- The consumer will inform the sales person of the specific appliance or appliances he or she wishes to purchase.
- The retailer will access an online web page to check to see if funds are available.
- If funds are available, the retailer will continue the web process and enter in consumer information and the specific appliance information.
- Once the information is entered in online, the retailer will hit "submit" and the rebate funds will be reserved for the customer. The retailer will then print the rebate form and hand it to the consumer.
- The consumer will then complete the purchase of the appliance at the store's cash register.
- The consumer will have the new appliance installed or delivered and

have the old appliance removed from the home.

■ The consumer will then mail in the rebate form provided by the retailer, along with proof of purchase, to the rebate fulfillment company. The address will be provided on the rebate form.

■ The consumer will have a unique rebate ID number and will be able to check the status of their rebate via an online system anytime.

■ Rebate forms must be post-marked by June 30 to submit for rebate fulfillment.

■ The rebate check will be mailed to the consumer within four to six weeks of rebate submission. The consumer will provide the mailing information at the time of purchase.

■ If the consumer loses the rebate form, the store where the consumer purchased the appliance can reprint the rebate form if the consumer knows the rebate confirmation number.

Rebate amounts

The appliances and rebate levels are below. For a detailed list of Energy Star models visit www.energystar.gov.

- Clothes washers — \$200
- Refrigerators — \$200
- Room air conditioners — \$50
- Water heaters — \$100
- Central air conditioners — \$100
- Gas furnaces — \$100
- Ground source heat pumps — \$250
- Air source heat pumps — \$250

Q. If I buy one of the approved appliances as an addition to what I already own, will it qualify?

A. No. This is an appliance replacement program, designed to take inefficient appliances out of service and replace them with high-efficiency models. Old appliances must be removed from the property in order to qualify. First-time buyers of these appliances also are ineligible. The new appliance must replace an old appliance.

Q. Can I buy an appliance over the Internet (online) as long as it meets the requirements?

A. No. Online purchases are not qualified purchases.

Q. Will the old appliances be recycled?

A. Recycling is encouraged, yet not required; however, old appliances must be hauled away, either by the retailer or through some other method that you determine. The rebate application you mail in will have a place where a retailer, recycling center or disposal site representative can sign or stamp, or you can self-certify, acknowledging you will properly dispose of the old equipment.

Q. Can I keep, sell or gift the old appliance to someone else?

A. No. You must dispose of the old appliance.

Q. The nearest retailer to me is actually in a neighboring state. If I purchase there, can I still get an Oklahoma rebate?

A. No. You must purchase from a registered Oklahoma retailer.

Q. I am a landlord. Can I purchase appliances for my rental homes?

A. No. Renters are eligible for the rebate, though.

Q. How many rebates can I get?

A. There is a maximum of one rebate per appliance and two rebates per household.

Q. Are there other rebates available?

A. Yes. Many utilities and electric co-ops offer rebates on energy efficient appliances and the federal government offers tax credits on a wide variety of efficiency systems and products. Some utilities also are offering loan programs for heat pumps.

Source: Oklahoma Department of Commerce www.okcommerce.gov



JEFF DIXON/STAFF

Lowe's appliance department salesman Angel Vazquez checks out an Energy Star-rated refrigerator next to a front-loading clothes washer at a display touting available rebates. Vazquez and his crew will be ready to reserve rebates for customers replacing old appliances with energy-efficient models Saturday.

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of the \$100 rebates for central air conditioners or gas furnaces or the \$250 rebates for heat pumps.

Shannon Pippin, sales and service manager for Pippin Brothers, said replacing a central AC unit doesn't involve going into a showroom.

"Buying an air conditioner isn't like buying a refrigerator," she said. "We need to send someone out there to make sure the customer gets the right solution."

If someone wants to take advantage of the rebate on Saturday, Pippin said her company is making appointments to send service personnel to homes where they can suggest the right unit. Once that is done, an office employee will go through the same online process as a retailer to reserve the rebate.

Though the evaluation process

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Source: Oklahoma Department of Commerce www.okcommerce.gov

may make it more difficult for a customer to secure a rebate, especially if they run out quickly, Pippin said there are a variety of other rebates available on energy-efficient HVAC systems that may make the state-run stimulus rebate pale in comparison.

"PSO, Cotton Electric and CenterPoint all offer rebates," she said, "and there is tax credit available."

Pippin said the rebates available top out at \$1,700, and that is on top of the energy savings that will be realized each month when an Energy Star-rated system is purchased.

More information is available at the state Department of Commerce website, www.okcommerce.gov. By Monday, the site will post a list of participating retailers.

United, Continental merger may be announced as early as Monday

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

PHILADELPHIA — United Airlines and Continental Airlines Inc. have reportedly reached a merger agreement, and a deal could be announced Monday if their respective boards approve the all-stock transaction.

What would the combination, creating the world's largest air-

line, mean to the flying public? People familiar with the talks say the new airline would be named United, based in Chicago, and headed by Continental Chief Executive Officer Jeffery A. Smisek, who took over in January.

United CEO Glenn F. Tilton would be chairman, according to several reports.

United's board reportedly met Friday to vote on the deal, and Continental's board met Friday and is expected to vote Sunday.

Passengers could see higher fares on some routes, although United and Continental do not have many overlapping nonstop flights, said Rick Seaney, CEO of Farecompare.com, an airline

price-comparison website. "The only overlap is in their hubs, and it's a small number of flights," he said.

United has an East Coast hub at Dulles. Continental has a major hub in Newark.

Prices would remain stable in cities where there is competition from low-cost airlines such as

Southwest Airlines Co., JetBlue Airways Corp. and AirTran Airways.

"The bottom line is, prices are going up anyway, regardless of this merger," Seaney said. "Airlines came off decade lows last year. Prices have nowhere else to go but up. The only question is how high."