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Colorado's job growth is fifth slowest in country

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Colorado employers added 6,800 jobs between February and March, which would normally be a strong showing, except that number was below the 10,000 striking King Soopers workers who returned to work, according to a monthly update Friday from the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment.

Call security to aisle nine, a bunch of Colorado jobs are missing.

Colorado's payroll counts have shrunk for the past three months, pushing the state's annual job growth rate down to 0.1%, which is the fifth slowest pace in the country and far from the national gain of 1.2%.

Colorado's unemployment rate rose from 4.7% in February to 4.8% in March and remains higher than the U.S. rate of 4.2%.

"It is difficult to reconcile the data with what is happening on the streets," said Broomfield economist Gary Horvath.

Colorado isn't as heavily dependent on international trade as coastal states and isn't a manufacturing powerhouse vulnerable to retaliatory tariffs. The state's federal workforce has suffered some nicks, but layoffs aren't widespread yet. Retail sales are up, meaning people haven't pulled back sharply on spending.

And while things aren't robust as in recent years, Horvath said the economic vibe isn't one of stagnation or contraction.

"For the most part, the Colorado economy has not been significantly impacted by the uncertainty associated with the change in administration. Given the current state of the Colorado labor market, it is not well-positioned to deal with significant federal policy changes in the months ahead," he said in an email.

Here's what the math looks like. In January, there were 2,977,600 non-farm jobs in Colorado on a seasonally adjusted basis. In February, that number dropped to 2,966,000, reflecting the missing King Soopers workers. The March count recaptured the returning workers, but the total number was 2,972,800, or 4,800 below the January count.

The March report also revised February job losses to 11,600 rather than the 8,900 initially estimated.

Of the monthly gains in March, 1,000 jobs came in the public sector and 5,800 in the private sector. Year-over-year, Colorado has added 2,300 jobs, which is a weak showing. That includes an additional 13,800 government jobs and a loss of 11,500 private sector jobs. Especially worrisome is the loss of 8,400 jobs in professional and business services, which is a higher-paying sector.

Trade, transportation and utilities are down 1,900 jobs over the past year, while information and financial activities are each down 1,300. Even construction and other services lost 1,100 each. Educational and health services rose by 1,500 and leisure and hospitality is up by 1,400.

Colorado's job counts were considered unreliable last year because of problems tied to a modernization of the state's unemployment insurance reporting program. The problems still might not be fixed, Horvath said, and revisions could show that hiring has been stronger than what the official reports are showing and more in line with the rest of the country.

But it might also be a case that the state — along with fellow laggards like Iowa, Arizona, Massachusetts and West Virginia — might be leading the country into a recession.