

## Wyoming jobless rate lowest in nation

Unemployment went up in every state except Louisiana in January

By The Associated Press

CHEYENNE - Wyoming has the nation's lowest unemployment rate, according to the latest federal figures.

The U.S. Labor Department on Wednesday released its monthly report on state unemployment. The report shows that while the national unemployment rate in February rose to 8.1 percent - highest in more than 25 years - Wyoming's unemployment rate was just 3.7 percent.

Jim Robinson, senior economist with the Wyoming Department of Administration and Information, said the federal figures may be lagging in showing the state's economic downturn.

"I think that some of this information might even be misleading," Robinson said of the federal figures. "We've been looking at some of the jobless claims information we've been getting from the last few months, which are telling us that claims are up."

The state's total civilian labor force is just more than 290,000, Robinson said. He said more than 5,700 Wyoming workers filed new jobless claims in all employment sectors in January. He said that's up 98 percent from the fewer than 2,900 new claims the state received during the same month a year ago.

Robinson said the number of new claims filed in the natural resources and mining sectors increased 265 percent in January compared to the same month the year before.

While federal unemployment figures are calculated from companies responding to surveys, Robinson said the state's unemployment claim information measures precisely how many people go into state offices every month and file a claim.

Other areas of Wyoming's economy seeing sharp increases in new jobless claims include retail trade, leisure and hospitality, and financial activities.

Robinson said he wouldn't dispute that Wyoming is doing better than most other states, at least so far.

"On a relative point of view, I would say that the state is in much better shape than most other states in the country even though we're starting to experience some difficulty," he said.

"My take on it is that the data may be lagging in terms of what may be going on in the state right now in terms of employment," Robinson said.

In January, jobless rates rose in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Louisiana was the only state to record a drop.

About 5.1 million people are drawing state unemployment insurance, near an all-time high, the federal government said last week. The crush has exhausted unemployment funds in New York, California and elsewhere, forcing them to tap the federal government for money to keep paying benefits.

Joblessness was worst in the West and Midwest, where the loss of manufacturing, construction, retail and other jobs tied to the collapsed housing market was especially severe.

The West - home to California and some other states that led the housing boom - has been battered by the housing bust. And jobs are vanishing from the Midwest as the troubles of Detroit's beleaguered automakers spill over and reduce employment in industries linked to autos, such as car parts and other components used in production.

Marion Loomis, executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association, said Wednesday that he expects to see the state's economy follow the national decline.

"I don't think there's any question that the recession is going to hit the minerals industry like it has across the country," Loomis said. "But I would hope that the impact is going to be less severe in Wyoming because of the necessary nature of what we produce, for the most part.

"Coal, for electricity for homes, is not going to go down; coal for steel plants and aluminum plants probably will go down," Loomis said.

Demand for bentonite, which is used in the manufacture of steel, will also likely decline, Loomis said.

"Fortunately for bentonite, we still have kitty litter," he said.

Loomis said the state hasn't seen much decline in the demand for soda ash, which is used in the manufacture of glass. The automobile industry is a big consumer of glass.

Anticipating falling state revenues from sagging energy revenues, Gov. Dave Freudenthal recently warned state agencies to prepare for possible funding cuts of from 5 to 10 percent in the fiscal year that starts in July.