

Oil Patch Counties See Top N. Dakota Wages

JAMES MacPHERSON, Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — High-paying jobs in North Dakota's booming oil patch helped bump the state's average annual wage by 10 percent last year to nearly \$46,000 though the state continues to lag behind the national average, a Job Service analysis showed.

"We're seeing pretty incredible increases," Job Service North Dakota research analyst Michael Ziesch said Wednesday. "We're slightly behind the national average but the gap is closing quickly."

North Dakota's average annual wage jumped 73 percent between 2002 to 2012, from \$26,550 to \$45,909, Job Service data show. Nationally, the average wage in 2012 was \$49,200. Ziesch said.

Western North Dakota counties that produced oil last year held nine of the top 10 spots in average annual wages, Job Service figures show. Williams, Slope, Dunn, McKenzie, Mountrail, Stark, Mercer, Burke and Divide counties, along with with coal-rich Oliver County, which ranked fifth in wages, were the only counties of the state's 53 that topped the statewide wage average, data show.

Cass County, which includes Fargo and Burleigh County, which includes Bismarck, had average salaries last year of \$43,267 and \$42,788 respectively, data show. Cass County ranked No.13 among counties for wages last year, down from 11 in 2011. Burleigh County slipped from No. 12 to 15, data show. Cass and Burleigh, the state's most populous counties, both had small increases in average salaries last year but were leapfrogged by oil-producing counties that paid higher wages, data show.

Williams County, in the heart of western North Dakota's oil patch, ranked first last year with an average annual salary of \$78,364. That's up from \$70,027 in 2011 and more than triple the average wage in the county a decade ago, Ziesch said.

Counties that have lignite coal mining or power plants historically had held the distinction of having the best-paid workers in North Dakota until the state's recent oil boom, Ziesch said.

Workers in the oil and natural gas industry earned an average salary of \$112,462 last year, Job Service data show. Mining jobs paid an average wage of \$77,380 last year in North Dakota and jobs that support the mining industry, such as those at power plants, paid an average wage of \$97,311 last year, data show.

Oliver, Mercer and McLean Counties are known as Coal Country because they are home to the state's four coal mines and six of the state's seven power plants.

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Oliver County, home to BNI Coal's Center Mine and Minnkota Power Cooperative's Milton R. Young Station, ranked first in wages until 2011, when it was surpassed by Williams County. Mercer County, home to Basin Electric Power Cooperative's Leland Olds Station near Stanton, also is an oil-producing county.

Oliver and Mercer counties had ranked at the top of list in North Dakota wages until 2009, said Steve Van Dyke, a spokesman for Bismarck-based Partners for Affordable Energy, a coalition that supports coal-based electricity.

Average wages in Oliver and Mercer counties have increased about 10 percent in the past five years, though not at the pace of stronger oil-producing counties.

"(2009) was about the time the oil boom started to raise wages dramatically in several western counties, Van Dyke said.

Seven North Dakota counties — Grant, McIntosh, Wells, Nelson, Eddy, Logan and Sheridan — had average wages last year of less than \$30,000. Eleven counties had average wages below \$30,000 in 2011, data show.

Sheridan County, in central North Dakota, had the state's lowest average wage of \$25,606 last year, but it was up from \$24,584 the year before, data show.

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