

Oil Refineries Desperate For Boomer Replacements

Peter Johnson

GREAT FALLS, Mont. (AP) — Concerned about the graying of its work force, three Billings area oil refineries persuaded MSU-Billings College of Technology to create a two-year program in process-plant technology. Almost 50 students are starting the concentrated, two-year program this semester, hoping to take advantage of median Montana wages of \$51,200 in the industry.

"It's designed to give students a solid foundation to enter the industry," said instructor Richard Wilson, 56, who recently retired from the ConocoPhillips refinery in Billing after 35 years in the industry.

"My age group ran the plants following the group that ran them during World War II and after," Wilson said.

Now young people need to be trained to replace baby boomers, he said.

Montana business and labor leaders worry that there may not be enough skilled workers to staff big manufacturing plants and build large industrial projects when the economy recovers.

"When construction was booming until two years ago, contractors had a huge concern about the lack of skilled workers," said Cary Hegreberg, executive director of the Montana Contractors Association, noting that the average age of Montana construction workers is now 46 or 47.

"Presuming the economy and construction rebound, the aging work force will unquestionably present a challenge to construction companies," he said.

Dave Galt, executive director of the Montana Petroleum Association, said the oil industry is facing a gap among the age group with mid-level experience.

"There's a shortage of people in their mid-30s to mid-40s to take over when the baby boomers retire," Galt said. The slowdown in oil markets between the late 1980s and late 1990s spurred some layoffs, he said.

Dana Leach, manager of the Montana Refining plant in Great Falls, said about 27 percent of the refinery's 95 employees are in their mid-50s or older, including about 16 percent of the 53 hourly labor, operational and maintenance employees.

"Those aren't huge numbers nearing retirement age, but plenty big, so we're preparing to backfill," Leach said.

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Applicants are given aptitude tests to evaluate skills in math, chemistry and mechanical reasoning, he said, so good high-school work can help land refinery jobs where pay averages \$57,000.

Right now during the economic slowdown union workers worry about finding steady work, said Ole Stimac, president of the North Central Montana Building and Construction Trades Council.

"But our work force is graying, no doubt about it," he added.

"We've still got enough Montana labor talent now," Stimac said, noting 80 percent of the workers who built a coal-fired plant at Hardin two years ago were Montanans. "But eventually we'll be in a pinch unless Montana gets more big projects in which journeymen craftsmen can train apprentice newcomers."

Tim Gregori, CEO of the Southern Montana Electrical Generation and Transmission, the group of electric cooperatives planning to build a power plant near Great Falls, agrees. Originally, plans were to use coal to fuel the operation, but now the first phase of the plant will use natural gas to produce electricity.

The coal-fired plant would have needed at least 250 boilermakers to assemble on site.

SME had a provision to require as many Montana boilermakers as possible and a mix of apprentices to work with journeymen "to perpetuate the trade by training younger workers," Gregori said.

"We wouldn't have wanted to be a parasite draining skilled workers from other Montana industrial plants, but rather provided an opportunity for training within the field," said Gregori, whose father was a boilermaker.

Construction of the facility planned now will require fewer workers in different skill areas, Gregori said, but they still will seek a mix of veteran and apprentice workers to beef up training.

Montana has about 270 boilermakers registered, said union official Jess LaBuff of East Helena. But many are not working because of the lagging economy or commuting to jobs on the East and West coasts, he said.

"If we could get a big industrial project going it would help bring Montana workers home," he said.

The union is training 36 new workers in its 6,000-hour apprentice program that takes three or four years to complete.

Both industry and labor unions are doing their part to meet the challenge of an aging work force.

Both backed legislative funding of the new building trades center building at MSU-

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Great Falls College of Technology.

Great Falls business, labor and education officials are exploring ways to better coordinate efforts to get high school students to consider possible vocational careers earlier.

Eleven union crafts worked with the MSU-Great Falls staff to conduct a "crafts rodeo" in October for 350 eighth- and ninth-graders.

"The idea was to put the seed in their brains early that there might be an alternative career better-suited for them than a four-year college," Stimac said.

Such efforts are good, said Mark Maki, supervisor of the state Labor and Industry Department's Apprenticeship and Training Programs, because there are two factors in the potential worker shortage.

"A lot of folks like me, who went into the skilled trades 30 or more years ago, are getting close to retirement age, or taking early retirement because they're worn out from the physically demanding work," said Maki, who is 60.

In addition, he said, there was a push by parents and some educators until recently to steer high-school students to college rather than vocational school.

"People didn't always recognize that not every kid is ideally suited for college and some can excel at hands-on construction work where they can earn wages of \$17 an hour an up," said the contractors' Hegreberg.

Maki said his agency has more demand from industry, labor and school districts the last five years to conduct career days, classroom presentations and job fairs.

The Labor Department does pay and retention surveys regularly of the 1,300 people taking part in apprentice programs each year, Maki said.

They make a good selling point for working in skilled crafts.

The average third-year apprentice made \$18.30 an hour in the last survey, or roughly \$38,000.

After completing the apprenticeship, they can make \$20 to \$40 an hour, depending on craft, occupation and location, he said.

The retention survey found 85 percent of those who completed trade-apprentice programs were still working in the same trade in Montana 10 years later.

"That's a darned good retention rate," Maki said. "It shows most still enjoy what they're doing and have found the job security and income to remain in Montana."

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