

Columbia County profile

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Overview

Regional context

Columbia County was carved out of Walla Walla County in 1875. The county covers only 868.63 square miles of land, ranking 31st in size among Washington's 39 counties. Columbia County is located in southeastern Washington, borders the Oregon state line to its south, Whitman County and the Snake River to its north, Walla Walla County to its west and Garfield County to its east. Columbia County has the third-smallest population in the state with population density of 4.7 people per square mile. The County is mostly agricultural land that has specialized in farming, especially wheat, asparagus and green peas as well as ranching and logging. Today, agriculture and food processing are still dominant along with food manufacturing and local government.

Local economy

The Columbia County area was home to many tribes including Palouse, Nez Perce, Yakama, Wanapum, Walla Walla, and Umatilla. Breeding, trading and selling horses was a central part of tribal existence. Later, trading became one of the primary economic activities as fur and goods trading companies moved into the area with pioneers. As pioneers started settling in the area, agricultural and ranching activities prospered as demand for produce and meats grew with new influx of gold rush pioneers.

Due to employment activities primarily centered in agriculture and government, Columbia County has had a marginally stable economy. Nevertheless, employment activities have developed a small seasonal pattern for the past five years mainly due to new wind projects such as Hopkins Ridge, Marengo and the Dayton wind farms. Recent work has been started to reestablish food processing in the county with the new Blue Mountain Station project. This project will serve as a food processing business incubator, blending sustainable, locally grown produce with food and organic food production.

Ski Bluewood, the local ski area, changed in ownership to ensure the local ski area continued to operate. This local skiing facility is an important source of tourism and seasonal employment for residents across the region. Local micro manufacturing and retail sectors are bouncing back and sprouting a new entrepreneurial environment, which is greatly contributing to local economic stability.

Geographic facts

	Columbia County	Rank in state
Land area, 2010 (square miles)	868.63	31
People per square mile, 2010	4.7	36

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Outlook

In Columbia County, most dominant industry is healthcare and social assistance in both public and private sectors. Per U.S. Census estimates, about 21.0 percent of civilian employed population 16 years and over are working in the healthcare and social assistance industry. This is directly related to the availability of jobs in the county where in 2017 about 18.0 percent of county jobs were in healthcare and social assistance. This industry continues to grow at a 1.6 percent rate per year for the past seven years. Demand for the healthcare and social industry sector continues to grow and it will be one of the leading front-runners of county economic growth.

Over the years, commodity-based industries have contributed the most to Columbia County growth. The agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industry expanded at a 2.5 percent rate for the past seven years, expanding its percent share in the county over the years. It was estimated that about 11.0 percent of total resident labor force is employed in the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industry. The wheat crop is in high demand and has been very profitable in the past couple of years. Commodities across most markets have continued to benefit from changing levels of global trade, demand and monetary valuations.

Columbia County is becoming a tourist destination for its historic preservation appeal and in turn is expanding its accommodation and food services industry, with a five-year average annual growth rate of 7.4 percent. Columbia pulp manufacturing plant construction has contributed to increased growth in the construction industry with 18.8 percent seven-year average annual growth.

Columbia County is part of the Eastern Washington workforce development, which has annual projections for employment growth at 1.1 percent through 2021.

Labor force and unemployment

Current labor force and unemployment statistics are available on the [Labor area summaries](#) page on ESD's labor market information website.

In 2017, Columbia County's civilian labor force totaled 1,766, which is an increase of 2.7 percent from 2016. The number employed increased by 3.7 percent to 1,667 in 2017 from 1,608 in 2016. Columbia County unemployment rate decreased by 0.9 percent by going from 6.5 percent in 2016 to 5.6 percent in 2017, as a result of increased labor force participation and availability of jobs.

The latest unemployment and employment statistics show the labor force at 1,827 in October 2018, with a 1.3 percent increase from the same time in 2017. All of the people that entered the labor force (24) and about two of those who were unemployed

propelled resident employment growth by 1.5 percent in October 2018, when compared to the same time a year before. The unemployment rate was recorded at 4.5 percent, which is the lowest unemployment rate on the record.

Industry employment

Current industry employment statistics are available on the [Labor area summaries](#) page on ESD's labor market information website.

Columbia County hosted some 1,263 jobs in 2017 with a 1.4 percent increase from 2016.

Goods-producing employment averaged 302 in 2017, posting an increase of 6.3 percent when compared to 2016. Total covered payrolls were \$18.8 million, which has increased by 11.0 percent from 2016 figures. The goods-producing industry makes up 23.5 percent of total employment.

- Agriculture represents the majority of the goods-producing industry, around 50 percent, and about 11.7 percent of total employment in the area. Agriculture had an average of 148 workers with total payrolls at \$4.9 million.
- From its most recent peak in 2009 of 424, goods-producing employment decreased as food manufacturing contracted due to closures of local manufacturing plants and the recession's effect on construction.
- Manufacturing represents 3.2 percent of total employment and provides about 42 jobs in the area with \$2.2 million in total wages.
- Columbia County has held steady in recent years mainly due to wind farm construction projects in the area, new small manufacturing initiatives and efforts with the Blue Mountain station.
- Construction makes up 7.1 percent of total county employment with 90 jobs in 2017. Construction decreased by 1 job or 1.1 percent in 2017, with \$7.4 million in covered payrolls. On average, construction workers in Columbia County took home over \$70,819 in 2017.

Service-providing employment averaged 961 in 2017, with no change over the year. Columbia County service-providing employment is comprised of many industries including government.

- Government employment, which represents 39.8 percent of total area employment, decreased by 0.6 percent in 2017 and had an average annual wage of \$48,374.
- Accommodation and food services increased over the year by 4.9 percent and represented 8.5 percent of total employment. Accommodation and food services had a total of \$1.8 million wages, contributing to average annual wages in this industry of \$16,670.

For historical industry employment data, [contact an economist](#).

Source: Employment Security Department/LMEA

Industry employment by age and gender

The Local Employment Dynamics (LED) database, a joint project of state employment departments and the U.S. Census Bureau, matches state employment data with federal administrative data. Among the products is industry employment by age and gender. All workers covered by state unemployment insurance data are included; federal workers and non-covered workers, such as the self-employed, are not. Data are presented by place of work, not place of residence.

Columbia County highlights:

The largest job holder group in Columbia County in 2017 was the 35 to 44 years of age group with 22.9 percent of the workforce. They were followed by 55 to 64 year-olds with 21 percent of the workforce.

In 2017, 52.7 percent of all industry jobs were held by men and 47.2 percent were held by women. Industry differences are discussed below:

- Male-dominated industries included construction (91.6 percent), administrative and waste management (88.9 percent), agriculture (82.8 percent), manufacturing (76.4 percent), utilities (73.1 percent) and wholesale trade (72.7 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included finance and insurance (80.0 percent), healthcare (79.3 percent), accommodations and food services (74.7 percent), professional, scientific and technical services (70.9 percent) and information (68 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2017, Columbia County had 1,263 jobs covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of over \$50.96 million.

The county average annual wage was \$40,354 in 2017, which was below the state's average annual wage of \$62,077. In 2017, Columbia County was ranked 19th in the state for average annual wages among the 39 counties.

The Columbia County median hourly wage was \$19.89 in 2017, an increase of \$1.06 over the year. The median hourly wage in Columbia County was well below the state's median hourly wage of \$24.89, which increased by \$0.98 over the year.

Source: Employment Security Department/WTS; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Bureau of Economic Analysis; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Personal income

Personal income includes earned income, investment income, and government payments such as Social Security and Veterans Benefits. Investment income includes income imputed from pension funds and from owning a home. Per capita personal income equals total personal income divided by the resident population.

In 2016, the per capita income in Columbia County was \$48,136, which was well below the state's per capita income of \$54,579 according to Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Median household income over the period 2012 to 2016 was \$42,083, well below the state's \$62,848, according to the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.

During the same time period, 14.0 percent of the population was living below the poverty level in Columbia County, compared to 11.0 percent for the state.

Population

According to the Census estimate for 2017, the Columbia County population was 4,047. The population of the county is expected to remain somewhat stable.

The Columbia County seat and largest city is Dayton, with a population of 2,555 in 2017. The second notable city is Starbuck, with a population of 130.

Population facts

	Columbia County	Washington state
Population 2017	4,047	7,405,743
Population 2010	4,078	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2017	-0.8%	10.1%

Age, gender and ethnicity

Columbia County has a large retirement community with 27.9 percent of population being 65 years and older in 2017.

- Columbia County's population 65 and older was 27.9 percent in 2017 compared to the state's 15.1 percent.
- Those under 18 years of age made up 18.8 percent in 2017 compared to the state's 22.2 percent.
- The youngest age group, those under 5 years of age, was 5.0 percent in 2017, much smaller when compared to the state's 6.2 percent.

Females made up 51.1 percent of the county's population, which is slightly above the state's 50 percent.

Diversity in the county shows 92.3 percent of residents are white, with 8.3 percent people of Hispanic or Latino origin, compared to the state's 79.5 percent and 12.7 percent, respectively.

Demographics

	Columbia County	Washington state
Population by age, 2017		
Under 5 years old	5.0%	6.2%
Under 18 years old	18.0%	22.2%
65 years and older	27.9%	15.1%
Females, 2017	51.1%	50%
Race/ethnicity, 2017		
White	92.3%	79.5%
Black	0.8%	4.2%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.7%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	2.6%	9.7%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	8.3%	12.7%

Educational attainment

Over the period 2012 to 2016, 89.9 percent of individuals age 25 and older were high school graduates, which is lower than that of Washington state (90.6 percent).

Over the same period, it's estimated that 25.4 percent of people in Columbia County 25 and older had attained a bachelor's degree or higher. This does not compare favorably with the state (33.6 percent).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Columbia County on ofm.wa.gov](#)
- [Columbia County on ChooseWashington.com](#)
- [Columbia County History](#)
- [Columbia County home page](#)
- [Port of Columbia](#)
- [Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)
- [Self Sufficiency Calculator for Washington State](#)
- [Southeast Washington Economic Development Association](#)
- [Dayton Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Walla Walla Community College Wind Energy Technology Program](#)

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