

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. One of the largest developments in the County has been the Columbia Pulp manufacturing plant. Columbia Pulp is North America's first tree-free market pulp mill, using wheat farmers' waste straw to create pulp for paper products as well as bio-polymers for a variety of industrial uses. This will be the staple of the Columbia Pulp employment growth in the near future.

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, healthcare and social assistance is a dominant industry in both public and private sectors. Per U.S. Census estimates, about 18.0 percent of civilian employed residents 16 years and over are working in the healthcare and social assistance industry, regardless of which county they work in, Columbia or nearby. This industry has continued to grow at a 1.3 percent rate per year for the past eight years. Demand for the healthcare and social industry sector continues to grow, and it will be one of the front-runners of county economic growth.

Over the years, commodity-based industries have contributed to Columbia County growth. The agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industry has expanded at a 1.6 percent rate for the past eight years, increasing its employment share in the county. It was estimated that about 8.4 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 seven-year average annual growth rate of 7.4 percent.

Manufacturing development by the Columbia Pulp company has changed the outlook for the county's economy by slowly increasing the number of jobs available, as the facility starts to operate and ramps up production.

Columbia County is part of the Eastern Washington workforce development area, which has annual projections for employment growth at 0.8 percent through 2022.

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 2018, Columbia County's civilian labor force totaled 1,789, which is an increase of 1.0 percent from 2017. The number employed increased by 1.0 percent to 1,689 in 2018 from 1,672 in 2017. The Columbia County unemployment rate was unchanged over the year.

The latest unemployment and employment statistics show the labor force at 1,905 in October 2019, with a 4.0 percent increase from the same time in 2018. About 59 people who entered the labor force in October found employment in the county or region, and about 20 people were unemployed and looking for employment.

Resident employment grew by 3.4 percent in October 2019, when compared to the same time a year before. The unemployment rate was recorded at 5.1 percent, which is higher than last year.

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 1,310 jobs in 2018, a 3.7 percent increase from 2017. Total covered payrolls were \$54.5 million, which increased by 6.9 percent from 2017 figures.

The goods-producing industry makes up 24.9 percent of total employment. Goods-producing employment averaged 326 in 2018, posting an increase of 18.5 percent when compared to 2017.

- Agriculture represents most of the goods-producing industry, around 46.2 percent, and about 11.5 percent of total employment in the area. Agriculture had an average of 151 workers with total payrolls at \$5.0 million.
- Manufacturing represents 5.3 percent of total employment and provides about 69 jobs in the area with \$3.9 million in total wages.
- Columbia County has held steady in recent years mainly due to wind farm projects, the Columbia Pulp Manufacturing facility, new small manufacturing initiatives and efforts with the Blue Mountain station.
- Construction makes up 6.3 percent of total county employment with 82 jobs in 2018. Construction decreased by 7 jobs or 7.8 percent in 2018, with \$5.8 million in covered payrolls. On average, construction workers in Columbia County took home over \$70,579 in 2018.

Service-providing employment averaged 984 in 2018, with no change over the year. Columbia County service-providing employment is comprised of many industries including government.

- Government employment, which represents 39.2 percent of total area employment, increased by 2.4 percent in 2018 and had an average annual wage of \$50,035.
- Accommodation and food services increased over the year by 6.5 percent and represented 8.8 percent of total employment. Accommodation and food services had a total of \$1.9 million wages, contributing to average annual wages in this industry of \$16,778.
- Retail trade industry expanded by 12.3 percent over the year to 82 jobs after slowing and decreasing employment due to closures in 2017. Total payrolls were at \$1.9 million.
- Healthcare and social assistance industry increased by 9.3 percent in 2018 by adding 7 more jobs to the local economy. Healthcare and social assistance makes up 6.3 percent of total employment and pays on average \$20,876 a year.

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 2018 was the 35 to 44 years of age group with 22.0 percent of the workforce. They were followed by 55 to 64 year-olds with 21.4 percent of the workforce.

In 2018, 52.5 percent of all industry jobs were held by men and 47.5 percent were held by women. Industry differences are discussed below:

- Male-dominated industries included construction (92.6 percent), agriculture (83.6 percent), utilities (75.8 percent), manufacturing (75.7 percent) and wholesale trade (75.7 percent).
- Female-dominated industries included finance and insurance (83.3 percent), administrative and waste management (81.0 percent), healthcare and social assistance (77.0 percent), accommodation and food services (71.0 percent), real estate (70.0 percent), educational services (68.4 percent), information (62.0 percent), professional, scientific and technical services (60.7 percent).

Source: The Local Employment Dynamics

Wages and income

In 2018, Columbia County had 1,312 jobs covered by unemployment insurance, with a total payroll of over \$54.6 million.

The county average annual wage was \$41,585 in 2018, which was below the state's average annual wage of \$66,195. In 2018, Columbia County ranked 22nd in the state for average annual wages among the 39 counties.

The Columbia County median hourly wage was \$20.38 in 2018, an increase of \$0.35 over the year. The median hourly wage in Columbia County was well below the state's median hourly wage of \$25.98, which increased by \$1.13 over the year.

Source: Employment Security Department/LMEA; 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 2017, the per capita income in Columbia County was \$45,918, which was well below the state's per capita income of \$57,896 according to Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Median household income over the period 2013 to 2017 was \$46,250, well below the state's \$66,174, according to the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.

During the same time, 13.3 percent of the population was living below the poverty level in Columbia County, compared to 10.3 percent for the state.

Population

According to the Census estimate for 2018, the Columbia County population was 4,059. The population of the county is expected to remain somewhat stable.

The Columbia County seat and largest city is Dayton, with a population of 2,560 in 2018. The second notable city is Starbuck, with a population of 130.

Population facts

	Columbia County	Washington state
Population 2018	4,059	7,535,591
Population 2010	4,078	6,724,540
Percent change, 2010 to 2018	-0.5%	12.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

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 2018 compared to the state's 15.4 percent.
- Those under 18 years of age made up 18.8 percent in 2018 compared to the state's 22.1 percent.
- The youngest age group, those under 5 years of age, was 5.1 percent in 2018, much smaller when compared to the state's 6.1 percent.

Females made up 51.2 percent of the county's population, which is slightly above the state's 50.0 percent.

Diversity in the county shows 91.5 percent of residents are white, with 7.8 percent people of Hispanic or Latino origin, compared to the state's 78.9 percent and 12.9 percent, respectively.

Demographics

	Columbia County	Washington state
Population by age, 2018		
Under 5 years old	5.1%	6.1%
Under 18 years old	18.8%	22.1%
65 years and older	27.9%	15.4%
Females, 2018	51.2%	50.0%
Race/ethnicity, 2018		
White	91.5%	78.9%
Black	0.7%	4.3%
American Indian, Alaskan Native	1.7%	1.9%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander	3.2%	10.1%
Hispanic or Latino, any race	7.8%	12.9%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Educational attainment

Over the period 2013 to 2017, 90.5 percent of individuals age 25 and older were high school graduates, which is lower than that of Washington state (90.8 percent).

Over the same period, it's estimated that 26.5 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 (34.5 percent).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Useful links

- [County data tables](#)
- [Census Bureau Profile](#)
- [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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