

A Report on Employing Blue Collar Workers

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A Report on Being a Blue Collar Worker



Malcolm Ballinger
Publisher

There has been much talk lately about how Panhandle businesses have been affected since Ivan. As a small businessman, I understand all too well the challenges facing large and small companies: increased health care costs, shortage of office space, increased material costs, etc. But how is all this affecting the blue collar workers? How have they coped with the increased cost of housing, health care, gas and more?

If qualified workers cannot afford to live in the Panhandle, then eventually businesses will suffer the consequences of staff shortages, probably having to hire whomever is available, qualified or not. I read Rosalind Fisher's article on this subject with great interest. We should be very concerned; we cannot solve all the problems, but I believe an affordable workforce housing must be a priority.

Again this year, my company struggled with increased health care premiums. We decided to continue the program, albeit with increased deductibles; however, many small businesses simply cannot afford to offer this benefit. I have also lost an employee because of her housing costs.

If the Panhandle is to continue to grow and prosper, these issues must be addressed soon. Whatever your point of view, I urge you to be proactive. Supporting your local Chamber Of Commerce is a good place to start.

On a brighter note, we have two golf tournaments coming up in the area: the Hooters Tour at Perdido Bay Golf Club and the Boeing Championship at Sandestin. You can find out all you need to know about these events throughout this issue. See you on the fairways!

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INTERNS
RENEE CHRISTIE • MATT BENDELL •
LINDSAY McMULLEN

CONTRIBUTORS
ED ROSE • WENDY GAUNTT •
NATALIE PRIM • BRYAN CLARK •
RALPH W. EMERSON III • ROSALIND FISHER

COPY EDITOR
OLIVIA BALLINGER

SPECIAL THANKS TO
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VISIT OUR WEB SITE AT
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EDITORIAL OFFICES
41 NORTH JEFFERSON STREET, SUITE 211
PENSACOLA, FLORIDA 32501
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A Report On Employing Blue Collar Workers in Northwest Florida

Blue collar business is booming in Northwest Florida, in part because of recent hurricanes and a growing population. Some of the businesses in the region that employ blue collar workers include power companies, farms, factories, contractors for area road work and stevedores at the Port of Pensacola.

In a recent interview, Sabrina Owens, the director of marketing for the Escambia River Electric Cooperative, gave her input on blue collar employment in Northwest Florida, as well as information on some of these types of jobs that the company provides in the area.

The EREC employs about 68 people from the area in positions ranging from clerical jobs, to linemen, apprentices, ground helpers, right of way, engineers, accountants and marketing specialists. The skilled staff that works to keep electricity flowing to area members does much of the grunt work.

"The line crews are responsible for installing and repairing electrical circuits, components and equipment, construction and maintaining utility system power lines, both above and below the ground, and clearing right of way for the electric lines," Owens said.

Many of the duties that the EREC crews are assigned to complete are ongoing tasks which could last for an unspecified amount of time. In this area of the country, especially with hurricanes and long, hot summers, the crews are often kept very busy.

"The hours for our line crews and dispatch teams are very demanding," Owens said. "A crew and dispatcher are on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week with additional crews available if needed." Owens also said that the crews often work in bad weather and dangerous conditions. The main goal is always to restore the member's power as quickly as possible.

Although the hours can be long and the working conditions dangerous, there are some positive aspects that make the EREC successful. "As a cooperative, EREC is owned by the members it serves and our members have a voice in the direction and activities of the cooperative," Owens said. "In addition, EREC is a local cooperative, which means our employees work and live in the same community with our members. Our members know our employees and know they can count on them to do what they say."

When asked how the economy in Northwest Florida affects the operations of a corporation, Owens added, "Northwest Florida is a great locale for businesses. More and more folks are moving to our area every day because Northwest Florida has some of the best schools and communities around, so it is relatively easy for employers to find qualified, accountable people to staff their businesses. "Local corporations benefit from a sound economy in our area, which makes a direct impact on our community's quality of life."

Another business that has reaped the benefits of its Northwest Florida location is the J.W. Renfroe Pecan Company in Pensacola. Renfroe has had a lengthy history in the Deep South and in Northwest Florida dating back to the mid 1930s.

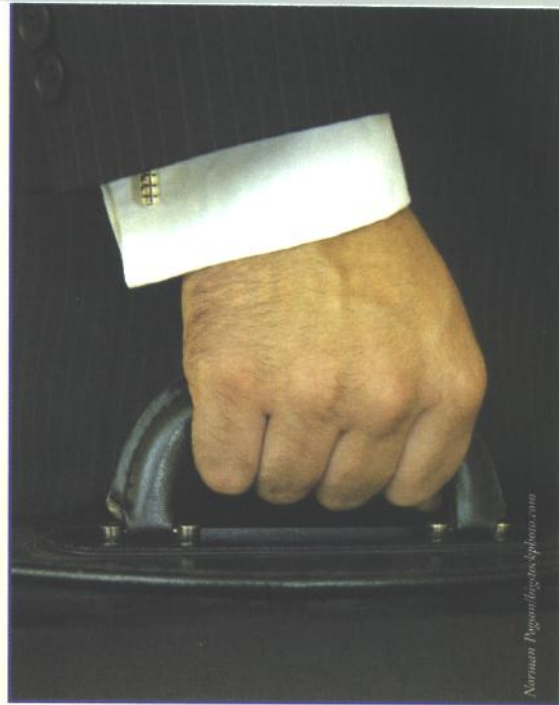
"Pensacola has always been a good growing area for pecans. Pecan trees were numerous in Downtown and in the area around Brownsville and out Alcaniz St. to Ferry Pass," said Jake Renfroe, owner. "The surrounding counties of Baldwin, Mobile, Escambia County Alabama, Santa Rosa and Okaloosa are all good pecan producing areas."

In the late 1950s, the Renfroes started buying pecans in the area and opened up a wholesale warehouse. The location of the Northwest Florida pecan plant was originally in Crestview, but was moved to Pensacola in 1979. Locally and around Northwest Florida, Renfroe's employee workforce varies with the time of year.

"Payroll goes from about 18 full time employees and managers to about 85 during the peak season in the fall quarter, 25 of the 85 are Georgia employees," Renfroe said. "Temporary services usually provide about 30 percent of our needs in Pensacola. Most of our direct hire seasonal employees are people who return every year. Others are hired through referrals from employees or hear about the jobs from friends and customers."

Seasonally, there are a good number of positions that become available that have to do with processing the nuts and getting them out via orders. There is also a gift shop located at the Pensacola plant located at 2400 W. Fairfield St.

"There is a wide range of work available in the fall. We usually hire about 10 seasonal retail sales people and stockers for the Nut Shop,"



Renfroe said "There are nine or 10 seasonal jobs in the kitchen, packaging, and shipping departments. The shelling plant had 17 seasonal employees this year with jobs ranging from machine operators, inspecting and sorting, to packaging and shipping." There are several benefits offered to Renfroe's employees including pay above minimum wage and health benefits as well.

"Pay rates are around \$7 to \$8 for beginning unskilled workers and more depending on ability," Renfroe said. "Full-time employees have health insurance, year-end bonuses and a retirement plan. They also have the privilege of working in an informal family setting."

Many of the nuts used are gathered from pecan groves around the South, such as Alabama, Georgia and, of course, Northwest Florida. In the past two years, the hurricanes and tropical storms have had an affect on the pecan groves in the area.

"The tropical storms of 2004 and 2005 destroyed the pecan crop for 75 miles around Pensacola," Renfroe said. "Each year, farmers nurtured their crops almost to harvest only to see them gone with the wind after the hurricanes. Some farmers saw their trees go down and their livelihood destroyed for years to come, especially in Santa Rosa County. However, most orchards from Pensacola westward suffered only minimal damage, maybe 10 percent tree loss."

Many businesses that call Northwest Florida home, find the people, location and economy to be beneficial to the success of their company. Renfroe said he considers it a privilege to live and work in Northwest Florida. With the diversified economy and a robust and dependable market, business is a success.

"I find Pensacola to be a friendly community in which to work; customers are cooperative and a pleasure to work with," Renfroe said. "Local and state government agencies are mostly cooperative and seem to want to help." ☀