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Only 9,500 jobs lost in storms' fury

By CHRIS COBBS and JACK SNYDER
SENTINEL STAFF WRITERS

Hurricanes Charley and Frances may have caused widespread damage across Florida, but at least the state's job picture escaped relatively unscathed.

Florida lost some jobs for the first time in three years but not as many as some economists had feared.

The state's 4.5 percent unemployment rate in September was nearly unchanged from August despite a loss of 9,500 jobs, representing just a fraction of the overall employment of 8 million, according to a report released Friday by the Florida Agency for Workforce Innova-

tion.

It was the first jobs report to reflect the toll hurricanes have taken on the state's economy since the first hurricane, Charley, hit in mid-August. The agency's next report is expected to include effects from Ivan and Jeanne as well.

"We can breathe a sigh of relief that they [the numbers] look as good as they do," said David Scott, economics professor at the University of Central Florida. Florida is still a national leader in job growth, he said.

The majority of the lost jobs were in construction and the leisure and hospitality industry, two parts of the economy that typically gain jobs this time of year. Leisure and hospi-

tality fell by a seasonally adjusted 5,200 jobs, construction by 3,100.

Even so, Florida still added jobs compared with a year ago, with total nonagricultural employment up by more than 125,000.

"We have positive job growth, but it isn't as strong as it was before the hurricanes, nor is the rate of growth quite as strong," agency spokesman Warren May said.

"We will have a fuller report in November that will include Ivan and Jeanne, helping us discern longer term effects on employment."

The modest jobs dip reflects a resiliency in the state economy, said

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A MODEST JOB LOSS

The impact of the 1st 2 hurricanes on Florida employment was slight — 9,500 nonagricultural jobs lost since August — but the state did lose jobs for the 1st time in 3 years. September unemployment in Florida was nearly unchanged at 4.5%.

SOURCE: Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation

September employment in Florida, seasonally adjusted

Profession	Monthly change in jobs	Percentage change
• Construction	-3,100	-0.7%
• Leisure and hospitality	-5,200	-0.6%
• Financial services	-2,500	-0.5%
• Manufacturing	-700	-0.2%
• Professional, business services	+6,800	+0.5%
• Education, health services	+1,300	+0.1%

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ECONOMY FROM C1

Craig McAllaster, dean of the Rollins College Crummer Graduate School of Business.

McAllaster said he wouldn't be surprised if the hospitality area lost more jobs, but the hurricanes also created work. "There will be plenty of employment for people who want it," he said.

Some of the areas hardest hit by Charley and Frances also had to shoulder the highest unemployment, including Indian River, St. Lucie, Charlotte and Polk counties. Brevard, Volusia and Osceola counties also showed an increase in their preliminary unemployment rates compared with August.

"We know there are people out there who are hurting, who lost everything they had," May said.

Still hurting, but not devastated, is Port Orange motel owner Bipin Patel, whose Volusia property was closed for two weeks between Frances and Jeanne for repairs and cleanup.

With a work force consisting only of himself and his wife, Patel said his 10-room establishment was solidly booked this week for the first time since the hurricanes.

"We need to get back to normalcy," said Patel, who said he had lost several thousand dollars due to lost bookings when he was closed.

Along with aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Small Business Administration, the state received assistance from the Department of Labor through the \$75 million National Emergency Grant program.

A beneficiary of that grant was Orlando's Derrick Perry, who was unemployed for four months until recently landing a job with the Workforce Cen-



GEORGE SKENE/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Derrick Perry (left) assists a job seeker at Workforce Central Florida in Orlando on Friday. A \$75 million federal grant to the state helped create jobs like Perry's.

tral Florida Recovery Team, which assists with cleanup, restoration and humanitarian efforts.

"It was a real blessing to get the job," said Perry, who began work about a week ago and whose wife is eight months' pregnant.

"I had been to more than 25 job interviews and was about to lose faith. A lot of companies took my application, but told me they had a hiring freeze because their business was off after the hurricanes."

Also encountering storm-related hardship was the owner of a small Orlando firm that saw business tail off by 50 percent in August and 60 percent in September.

"Business came to a screeching halt," said Debra Phillips, owner of Orlando Laser etc., a 15-year-old firm with five employees that sells and services printers, faxes, copiers and other hardware.

"This has been devastating, because many of our clients weren't buying supplies or making repairs. But we

didn't have to lay off anyone, and thanks to a small business loan, we are going to make it and even hope to expand."

Despite the difficulties faced by individuals like Perry and Phillips, there was a gain in jobs in Orlando, Fort Lauderdale and Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater.

Orlando gained 19,600 jobs, not seasonally adjusted, from September 2003. Most came in the leisure and hospitality and construction industries, the state data showed.

Job growth in those industries should continue, especially in construction, as the area continues to rebound from hurricanes, May said.

The last time the state lost jobs between August and September was in 2001 during the last recession and following the terrorist attacks.