

Stimulus creates site jobs

INL cleanup contractors have hired about 100 workers and expect to hire dozens more.

By SVEN BERG

sberg@postregister.com

Cleanup contractors at the Idaho National Laboratory site have begun hiring extra workers with federal stimulus money.

Bechtel BWXT Idaho and CH2M WG-Idaho have filled dozens of positions and expect to fill dozens more this year. For the companies, new hires offer a chance to get ahead in fulfilling their contracts to clean up hazardous waste on the INL site.

For the newly hired workers, it's a chance to catch up on bills, take a long-overdue vacation or jump start retirement accounts.

Christie Sharp fits in the last category.

Sharp, 46, hasn't worked a full-time job since the birth of her son 17 years ago, though she periodically worked part time. She was hired recently to work in administrative support for Bechtel at the Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Project.

She'd been looking for work for several months; so when her husband, also an AMWTP employee, told her the job was being advertised, she knew she couldn't pass it up.

"This was just an opportunity that I simply could not resist," she said. "When I saw this one come up I knew that that fit my skills."

Bechtel spokesman Rick Dale said hiring Sharp has already paid dividends for the company, as she's shown some expertise in handling presentations.

"It's wonderful to have her here," Dale said.

Between CWI and Bechtel, about 100 workers have been hired with the \$468 million allotted to INL in the federal stimulus bill enacted in January. Bechtel is looking to hire about 50 stimulus workers, and CWI wants to have about 100 hired by the end of September.

Natalie Packer, spokeswoman for CWI, said the company has received more than 1,400 resumes since it began looking to expand.

"The majority are local, but it does depend on the actual position itself and skills that are required, and if they're available here," she said.

The vast majority of Bechtel's hires are from eastern Idaho.

For Jeff Johnson, hired one month ago to work as an operator handling waste that will be shipped to New Mexico, a job with Bechtel came just in time. Johnson was laid off in January from his job at a cement company in Idaho Falls. He'd known he'd be laid off for a couple of months, so his family adjusted its spending and savings accordingly. But savings can only last for so long.

Johnson looked for jobs without success for about two months. If his temporary joblessness had turned into a long-term drought, he said, "it would have been bad."

These days, Johnson is taking part in an accelerated training program in Spokane, Wash., to learn how to handle equipment he'll need to use in his new job. Asked how he feels to be back at work, he said, "Great."

Like Sharp's, Johnson's job is designed to last up to three years. But both Sharp and Johnson are hoping they can parlay a good work record in that time into a permanent position when the stimulus money is exhausted. Johnson is hopeful there will be enough jobs available by then to hire the thousands of workers laid off in recent months.

"It'd be bad for a lot of people if they had to get stuck back out there in the field looking for jobs," he said.

Dale said Sharp's and Johnson's hopes aren't unrealistic. You never know what's going to happen, he said. Other workers might quit or retire, leaving just the openings they need to stay on permanently.