

High unemployment rate means larger work force, not fewer jobs, officials say

The unemployment rate was up steeply in Santa Cruz County in December for the second month in a row — but state employment officials say it has more to do with the size of the labor force than a decline in the number of jobs available.

December unemployment was at 8.7 percent, up from 6.6 percent in December 1989 and 6.6 percent in December 1988.

November unemployment was at 7.8 percent, up from 6.4 percent in November of the previous two years.

The numbers mean that county-wide, 11,500 people were unemployed and looking for work in Santa Cruz County last month.

There were more jobs available, and more people working in jobs. The only industries that reported a shrinking number of jobs for December compared to 1989 were construction, which went from 4,600 to 4,500 jobs, and government, which went from 16,900 to 16,800. Many industries reported whopping increases over last year, especially retail trade and services. But there was also more competition for the jobs that were available.

The civilian labor force in De-

cember 1988 was around 126,000, Lavera Wilkins of the Santa Cruz employment office said. In 1989, just after the earthquake, the figure was 127,500. This December, it was 132,600.

"Especially in Santa Cruz, we find that there are many people who are only marginally attached to the labor market — they don't necessarily want to work full time," Wilkins said.

People enter or leave the labor market for all sorts of reasons, she said.

Wilkins said the Santa Cruz employment office is noticing a significant increase in the number of people not registering for unemployment, insurance but registering with the agency for help in finding new jobs. That may reflect people who have not been working or looking for work and now want jobs, or people who have been working part time and now need full-time work, or any number of other things, she said.

In Watsonville, the manager of the state employment office, Tad Kimoto, said the office has been seeing what it considers a normal amount of unemployment for the winter months.

—Susanna Heckman