

Idaho's No. 1 spot really is the least it could do

Elizabeth Rudd/Moscow-Pullman Daily News Editorial Board

Idaho is finally No. 1 at something. Unfortunately, it is nothing the state should be proud of.

The Department of Labor has released statistics showing Idaho with the highest percentage of employees earning minimum wage. In 2012 alone, the percentage of hourly employees making minimum wage increased to 7.7 percent - a jump from 12,000 to 31,000 workers.

That is ridiculous.

Nationally, that same percentage dropped to 4.7 percent in 2012 from 5.2 percent in 2011.

Not only does Idaho have the highest number of people on minimum wage, it is one of the states that follows the lowest mandated wage - \$7.25 established by the federal government.

Three out of four jobs created in Idaho are in the service industry, according to the Department of Labor. While those are lower-paying jobs, that's OK. Many service sector positions were once intended to give teenagers the opportunity to hold a job, make some money and learn a work ethic. The jobs were not intended to support a family of four.

To ensure these workers were not being abused, the federal government established a minimum wage.

Times change. Today, it is more common for service industry workers to be the "breadwinners" of the family, whether it is a single- or two-parent household.

Relying on the service industry for about 75 percent of all new jobs in Idaho is not an effective way to stimulate an economy back to health. Before people can spend money on services, like dining out or getting their car's oil changed, they need to have a better income than \$7.25 an hour. Even at 40 hours a week, that doesn't leave room for frills and often barely pays the bills.

That lack of a living wage for many of the state's workers is a drag on the whole state's economy.

Emphasizing quantity and ignoring quality is a losing strategy when it comes to jobs.

The latest statistics give the Latah Economic Development Council and the dozens of similar organizations throughout the state real urgency to focus on that as they recruit new employers.

One of the best ways to boost the quality of new jobs is to support research at top-notch higher education institutions in Moscow and elsewhere around the state.