

Thousands more may get jobless benefits

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More than 6,000 laid-off workers await the signature of Gov. Ted Kulongoski and approval from the federal government to qualify for unemployment benefits.

The House passed the bill Tuesday on a 59-0 vote.

Senate Bill 462 clears the way for Oregon to receive \$90 million more as its share of \$7 billion that Congress earmarked for optional unemployment aid to states. States will get more money if they broaden the pool of workers eligible for unemployment benefits, which are paid from taxes on employers. Oregon already covers two of the four groups suggested by Congress for the incentives.

Rep. Dennis Richardson, R-Central Point, is a critic of the \$787 billion federal economic-recovery package that President Obama signed Feb. 17. But he said Oregon's unemployment rate left lawmakers no choice.

"At this time of need for economic stimulus, this is an opportunity for us to take advantage of," Richardson said.

After Kulongoski signs the bill, the U.S. Department of Labor must certify the change before Oregon gets the extra money.

The bill will allow laid-off workers to count their most recent work experience. Instead of the first four of the five most recently completed calendar quarters, state officials may calculate unemployment benefits based on sufficient earnings in the most recent four quarters.

Among the likely beneficiaries are women who return to work after raising children, young people who lose their first jobs, and people who work in industries that are sporadic, such as construction.