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Longer hours but fewer days

Big commutes, spiraling fuel prices and cost cuts because of the slumping economy have led to a resurgence across the Valley and nation of a workweek of four, 10-hour shifts.

By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee
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In a world of high gas prices and increasing job pressures, Lisa Alvey is happy for a little relief.

This summer, Alvey's employer -- Fresno Pacific University -- switched to a compressed workweek of four 10-hour days. The schedule gives her one extra day off a week.

To Alvey, that's one less day she makes the 35-minute commute from Madera Ranchos and one more day to spend time with her three young children.

"As a working mother, it's huge," said Alvey, the university's Web content coordinator.

The concept of working longer hours and fewer days is not new.

But workplace experts say long commutes, skyrocketing fuel prices and cost-cutting measures sought by businesses and government agencies to combat the effects of a slumping economy are causing a resurgence in the practice -- nationwide.

"When gas prices hit \$4, it triggered a switch by employees and employers that they had to do something different," said Rex Facer, an assistant professor of public finance and management at Brigham Young University and researcher of alternative work schedules. "And across the board, we are seeing interest in this."

Next month, Utah will become the first state in the nation to adopt a four-day workweek for thousands of government employees.

State officials have said cutting employees' gas expenses and reducing the cost of operating government buildings are big drivers for the new schedule.

Other states experimenting with alternative-work schedules include South Carolina, Alabama and Arkansas.

In the central San Joaquin Valley, several employers have adopted alternative-work schedules and many others are considering them.

"This is a hot issue right now," said Craig Strong, regional director with the California Employers Association. "We are getting several calls a week about this."

Diana Mock, spokeswoman for Fresno Pacific University, said about 200 of the private college's employees are working the new schedule.

It will last seven weeks, ending Aug. 8.

Many of Fresno Pacific's employees commute long distances -- from cities that include Hanford, Reedley, Madera, Yosemite Lakes and Visalia.

Mock is among the commuters, driving 14 miles from northwest Fresno to the college's

southeast Fresno campus.

"We know the challenges our employees are facing with gas prices and the price of everything else, so we wanted to be able to do something for them," she said.

An added bonus is that employees are working 36 hours a week, but being paid for 40.

The university is making up the difference.

Mock said the university is expected to resume its regular work schedule once the fall semester begins. But she said there likely will be discussions about whether it can be used year-round.

Gayle Surabian, Fresno County's public information officer, said several county departments have adopted an alternative-work schedule as part of the county's overall effort to reduce its impact on the environment. And other departments are also looking into it.

The county employs about 7,000 workers and has 23 departments.

The city of Fresno has been using a 4-10 work schedule for several years, said Terry Bond, personnel services director. And the city also recently has authorized the use of a variation of the compressed schedule where employees work eight nine-hour days and one eight-hour day, earning a day off every other week, per pay period.

The city employs 3,800 workers, and about 1,300 work the 4-10 schedule.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's 300 employees also work an alternative schedule similar to the one recently approved by Fresno.

The agency has employees in Fresno, Bakersfield and Modesto.

Jaime Holt, a district spokeswoman, said the flexible schedule gives workers an extra day off every other week and helps reduce vehicle traffic.

The agency also is urging other employers to look at alternative-work schedules, including telecommuting, as a way to reduce air emissions from vehicles.

Holt said, however, that some employers aren't convinced that giving employees an additional day off will translate to less driving.

"But what we have found is that those who commute are not driving to Fresno," Holt said. "And those who live in Fresno are driving as much as they would on a two-day weekend. So we still see a decrease."

Along with reducing emissions, Holt and BYU researcher Facer said the impact on employee morale also can benefit employers.

Facer has found that employees on an alternative-work schedule generally have lower absenteeism rates, are more productive and have higher levels of job satisfaction.

"We have also found that when people have more time to take care of family issues, it tends to not spill over into work," he said.

But will compressed work schedules work for all companies?

Human resource experts say that depends on the company and the type of work being done.

Tama Emery, regional vice president for Robert Half International, a staffing firm, said businesses interested in alternative work schedules must monitor the practice to make sure it performs properly.

Employers also must keep in mind that under California law, an alternative-work schedule must be approved by the employees and the state must be notified.

Under a traditional work schedule, employees are eligible for overtime pay after working eight hours.

But under a 4-10 schedule, overtime is earned after 10 hours.

"The fact is there are options out there for employers to consider," Emery said. "It may not be for everyone, but the bigger issue is that more and more employees are getting tired of long commutes, and more and more companies are working to accommodate their employees."

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