The Tenth District Economy: Avoiding Recession?

By Tim R. Smith

Economic growth in the Tenth Federal Reserve District slowed during 1990. Both employment and income growth subsided during the year due primarily to weak manufacturing and construction sectors. Other sectors, including agriculture and energy, continued to improve.

While the district slowed on average, a divergent pattern developed among district states in 1990. Differences in the mix of sectors led to differences in economic performance among district states in 1990. The Missouri economy was especially weak while the other six district states did better. Missouri’s economy, heavily dependent on manufacturing, faltered along with the national economy. But improvements in the energy sector and relatively strong farm incomes insulated most of the region from a more general downturn in economic activity late in 1990.

The district economy will likely slow further in 1991. At issue, though, is whether the region can avoid recession. Most district states probably can avoid declining employment and income. Excluding Missouri, where the manufacturing downturn is expected to linger, the region stands a good chance of staying afloat in 1991 amid more difficult times for the U.S. economy. A more stable energy sector and only slightly weaker farm incomes will likely offset weakness in other sectors of the district economy.

This article reviews the district’s economic performance in 1990 and explores the outlook for 1991. The first section of the article reviews the 1990 economic performance of the district and its individual states. The second section discusses the district’s major sectors and their employment outlook. The third section examines the recent and prospective economic performance of each of the district states.

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Recent Performance in the District

The district economy slowed during 1990 as evidenced by both employment and income growth. Most of the slowing can be traced to Missouri, which accounts for a very large share of district employment. Although economic growth also slowed in most other states, they continued to perform as well as the nation.

This article assesses the district's 1990 economic performance using the most recent data available. Employment growth in 1990 is based on data for the first three quarters of the year, and income growth in 1990 is based on data for the first half of the year.

Employment growth in the district slowed during 1990. Average employment grew at an annual rate of about 1.3 percent, down from the 2.0 percent rate recorded in 1989 (Chart 1, Panel A). Growth in the labor force slowed even more than growth in employment, however, causing the district's unemployment rate to fall from an average 5.2 percent in 1989 to 4.9 percent in 1990. The district continued to add jobs at a slower pace than the nation throughout most of the year. The district appeared to outperform the nation in the fourth quarter, although employment data are not yet available to confirm this.

Growth in real nonfarm personal income in the district was sharply lower in 1990. Income grew just 0.2 percent in 1990, compared to 2.3
percent in 1989 (Chart 2, Panel A). Nonfarm income growth in the district trailed income growth in the nation. Nevertheless, strong farm income helped offset the weakness in nonfarm income in several district states.

Although employment and income growth both slowed in 1990, district averages do not tell the whole story. A big drop in job growth in Missouri, where nearly a third of the district's workers are employed, pushed average employment growth in the district below national employment growth. Average employment growth slowed in the remaining six states, but actually outstripped the national average (Chart 1, Panel B). Employment growth in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and New Mexico was slower than in 1989 (Chart 3). Wyoming employment declined after growing strongly in 1989. Only Oklahoma showed faster employment growth in 1990 than in the previous year.

Real nonfarm income in the district grew slower in 1990 than in 1989 as weak growth in Missouri continued to drag down district averages (Chart 2, Panel B). Income growth slowed in Oklahoma, Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming; while income in Kansas fell slightly after growing in 1989 (Chart 4). In Missouri, income was flat following moderate growth in 1989. In all district states, farm income helped shore up poor performance in nonfarm income growth.
Chart 3

Employment Growth, Tenth District States

Note: Employment growth rates are based on total nonagricultural employment. For 1990, annualized growth rates reflect only seasonally adjusted data through the first three quarters.


Review and Outlook by Sector

Most sectors of the district economy slowed in 1990, but the degree of slowing varied. Manufacturing and construction experienced net job losses during the year and are not expected to improve much in 1991. But agriculture and energy remained relatively strong in 1990 and are likely to bolster the region’s economy again in 1991.

Recent sector performance

District manufacturing activity faltered in 1990 following a weak 1989. The regional downturn paralleled a similar downturn nationwide, which was largely due to weaker consumer demand for manufactured goods. Manufacturing employment in the district fell slightly in 1990 after rising very slowly the year before (Table 1). The district lost factory jobs at a much slower rate than the nation in 1990.

The district’s manufacturing employment downturn was rooted in the durable goods sector, where job losses were significant (Table 1). Among durable goods industries in the district, transportation equipment recorded the biggest job losses during 1990. Most of these losses occurred at automobile assembly plants in Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma, where
layoffs became commonplace during the year. District plants produced about 17 percent fewer units in the 1990 model year than in the year before. Consequently, the district’s share of total U.S. auto production fell from 14.5 percent in 1989 to 13.6 percent in 1990. In contrast to weakness in the auto industry, the general aviation industry improved somewhat during 1990. Although still hampered by high product liability costs, aircraft sales continued to advance, particularly in foreign markets.

Manufacturing of nondurables in the district was significantly stronger than durables in 1990 (Table 1). Food processing and printing and publishing, the two industries that make up over half of nondurables manufacturing employment in the district, were both strong in 1990. Overall, employment growth in nondurables industries improved slightly compared with 1989, but food processors added jobs at twice the pace of the previous year. Job growth in printing and publishing remained little changed from the moderate pace set in 1989.

The district’s construction sector weakened further in 1990 following a lackluster performance in 1989. Reflecting soft building activity across the region, construction employment fell.

District housing activity improved only modestly in 1990. Lower home mortgage rates in the second half of the year helped homebuilding activity very little. Housing permits authorized in the district rose only 3.2 percent
in the first three quarters of the year from the depressed levels during the same period in 1989. Moreover, the value of residential construction contracts awarded rose 1.2 percent. While these improvements were small, they compared favorably to big declines in residential construction activity nationwide.

Nonresidential construction activity in the district weakened slightly in 1990. High office vacancy rates continued to limit nonresidential building in many district cities. Office vacancy rates remained especially high in Albuquerque, Denver, and Oklahoma City. The value of nonresidential building contracts awarded in the first three quarters of 1990 was 0.3 percent less than in the same period in 1989. Awards fell even more in the nation.

Government remained a source of moderate strength to the district economy in 1990. Growth in total government jobs more than doubled in 1990, with increases at the federal, state, and local levels. Despite a slowdown in defense spending, the federal government remained an important influence on the district economy. Federal employment in the district grew moderately in 1990, after declining slightly in 1989. State and local governments, a far more important source of district employment than the federal government, also added jobs at a faster pace in 1990.

Fiscal conditions of district states were mixed in 1990. The size of a state’s year-end balance relative to its general fund spending the year before is viewed as a key indicator of fiscal condition. By this measure, fiscal condition improved in four district states and worsened in three district states.³

Growth of the district’s service sector slowed in 1990 after rapid growth in 1989. This sector is comprised of such diverse industries as hotels and restaurants, personal services, business services, and health care. Employment growth in the district’s service sector slowed despite some improvement in tourism (Table 1).

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percent change</th>
<th>1989*</th>
<th>1990†</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>-.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Durable goods</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation equipment</td>
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<td>-3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondurable goods</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food processing</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing and publishing</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale trade</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal government</td>
<td>-.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>State and local government</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance, insurance, real estate</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
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</table>

* From fourth-quarter 1988 to fourth-quarter 1989.
† First three quarters, seasonally adjusted annual rate.

National growth of service employment also slowed in 1990 but remained considerably stronger than in the district.

Mirroring a slowdown in the nation’s trade sector, retail and wholesale trade in the district also slowed during 1990. Employment growth in both sectors slowed significantly (Table 1). While growth in retail trade employment in the district nearly matched national growth, growth in wholesale trade employment was somewhat slower than national growth.

District agriculture had a good year in 1990. Above-normal crop yields led to big crops in the district. Livestock returns were also strong, especially for the district’s important cattle industry. With big crops and strong livestock returns, farm income was at a record high
last year. Farmland values continued to rise, and farm financial conditions remained healthy.

The district’s mining sector, led by the oil and gas industry, continued to improve in 1990. Jobs were added at a solid pace during the year, after no gains in 1989. Despite the improvement, mining employment growth in the district continued to trail growth in the nation.

The district’s energy industry was influenced directly by swings in world oil prices. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait resulted in much higher and more volatile oil prices in the second half of 1990. After falling in the second quarter, oil prices increased sharply after the invasion. The generally higher oil prices in the last half of the year brought increased oil and gas activity in the district’s oilpatch. But oil price volatility and uncertainty about the future course of oil prices confined most of this activity to increasing the productivity of existing wells, not exploring for new reserves. Underscoring that trend, the average number of drilling rigs operating in district states in the first three quarters of 1990 was 277, up only moderately from 241 in the first three quarters of 1989.

Sector outlook

District manufacturing activity will likely be weak again in 1991, mirroring a continuing slump in national manufacturing activity. Business fixed investment and purchases of consumer durable goods are expected to weaken further. Moreover, while the lower valued U.S. dollar should help spur growth in exports, slower economic growth abroad will limit export growth. The national manufacturing slump will be felt mostly in Missouri with its high concentration of transportation equipment industries. Defense contractors will be hurt by federal deficit reduction measures, while automobile producers will cut back further due to continued weakness in new car sales. While nondurables manufacturing activity is expected to decline less than durables manufacturing, weaker national demand for district products may impede growth in such regional industries as food processing and printing and publishing.

Construction activity in the district will probably slump further in 1991. High vacancy rates in commercial buildings and the generally weak regional economy will continue to depress nonresidential construction. Lower mortgage interest rates toward the end of 1990 will likely do little to spur residential construction in parts of the region with sizable housing inventories.

The government sector cannot be counted on to offset weakness in other sectors of the district economy in 1990. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act will limit growth in federal spending in the region. Moreover, state fiscal conditions are likely to come under stress as economic growth slows. Total balances as a percent of general fund spending are projected to be smaller in 1991 than in 1990 in all seven district states.

Weak economic conditions in the nation and the region will hamper growth in the district’s trade and service sectors in 1991. Sluggish growth in personal income will further weaken retail trade in the district. And the slowdown in services should continue. Tourism, in particular, stands to suffer from sluggish economic conditions in the nation and the region.

District agriculture will remain strong in 1991, but farm program cuts and weak crop prices will likely reduce farm incomes somewhat. The outlook for livestock producers remains good, and profits will be helped by weak crop prices. Cautious increases in farm debt and modest gains in farmland values should keep farm financial conditions healthy.

Continued gains are possible in the district’s mining sector in the year ahead, but the uncertainty now facing the oil and gas industry will keep the gains small. Many market analysts suggest a gradual decline in oil prices during 1991 as events in the Middle East unwind.
However, such a scenario is far from certain. A war in the Middle East would send oil prices soaring and add additional uncertainty about world supply conditions. On the other hand, a peaceful resolution could cause oil prices to plummet. Neither price scenario bodes well for the district energy industry because uncertainty about oil prices will discourage energy companies and their lenders from making large investments in explorative drilling.

Mixed Performance in District States

The district economy slowed on average in 1990, but performance ranged widely across the district’s seven states. Kansas was the strongest state, with growth surpassing the national average. Wyoming was the weakest state, with growth well under the national average. The range of performance was tied directly to the mix of industries found in individual states. States dependent on manufacturing fared poorly, while states that depend more on agriculture and energy generally did much better. Looking ahead, the mix of sectors will again be key to the 1991 outlook among district states.

Kansas

Kansas job growth was the fastest among district states in 1990 and well above the national rate. Nevertheless, employment growth in the state slowed compared with 1989 (Chart 3). And nonfarm real personal income fell slightly in the first half of the year after posting moderate growth in 1989 (Chart 4).

The Kansas farm economy posted a strong performance in 1990. A good wheat crop and strong livestock profits contributed to high farm incomes in most areas. Strong farm income helped offset the weak income growth in other parts of the state’s economy.

Manufacturing activity in Kansas faltered somewhat in 1990. Durable goods manufacturing employment declined, while nondurable goods manufacturing employment continued to grow. Automobile production in Kansas City slowed, as the General Motors plant responded to weak orders from dealers. Manufacturers of general aviation aircraft in Wichita continued to increase billings in 1990, although fewer aircraft were produced.

The mining sector in Kansas turned around in 1990. Mining employment increased at an annual rate of 7.3 percent, up significantly from a decline of more than 5 percent in 1989. Higher average oil prices and an optimistic outlook for natural gas pushed up the number of drilling rigs operating in the state. And coal production in Kansas, although very small compared with coal production in neighboring states, increased 23 percent in the first ten months of the year from the same period in 1989.

The Kansas economy will likely slow further in 1990 but should continue to outperform other district states. The Kansas manufacturing sector will suffer from some of the same problems as the national manufacturing sector. For example, weak national business conditions will likely lead to a slowing in the state’s food processing and printing and publishing industries. However, improving performance in aircraft production will bolster the state’s manufacturing sector. Uncertainty about oil prices may limit improvement in the state’s energy industry, but farm incomes will likely remain strong despite lower crop prices.

Oklahoma

Economic conditions in Oklahoma held up relatively well in 1990. Employment grew faster than in 1989, and Oklahoma exceeded all other district states except Kansas in job growth (Chart 3). However, growth of real nonfarm personal income slowed substantially in 1990 (Chart 4).
Oklahoma’s energy industry improved in 1990. Mining employment grew nearly 6.0 percent in 1990, four times the 1989 rate. The average number of drilling rigs operating in Oklahoma oil and gas fields in the first three quarters of the year was about 5 percent higher than in the same period a year earlier.

Manufacturing activity in Oklahoma weakened in 1990. Producers of both durable and nondurable goods turned in lackluster performances. Total manufacturing employment fell slightly in 1990 after increasing 1.1 percent in 1989. With declines in production and employment, automobile assembly was among the softest spots in Oklahoma’s manufacturing sector.

Oklahoma’s trade and service sectors were mixed in 1990. Trade employment grew faster than in 1989 and faster than the national trade sector. But employment growth in the service sector turned negative in 1990 after posting solid gains in 1989.

The Oklahoma economy will probably slow somewhat in 1991. The energy sector, while remaining stable, will likely not sustain the growth it experienced in 1990 due to an uncertain outlook for oil prices. Moreover, the state’s manufacturing sector will continue to reflect ongoing weakness in the nation’s manufacturing sector. A relatively strong agricultural sector will only partly balance the weakness in other sectors.

Nebraska

Nebraska’s economy remained relatively strong in 1990. The state’s employment growth declined somewhat from 1989, but was well above the district average (Chart 3). Strong farm income and gains in nondurables manufacturing continued to support job growth. But growth in real nonfarm personal income fell three full percentage points in 1990 (Chart 4).

The Nebraska farm sector enjoyed another strong year. Big crops and high livestock returns boosted farm incomes. Higher fuel costs and the prospect of lower government payments have only recently begun to dampen farmers’ spending on farm equipment and other discretionary items.

Nebraska was the only district state where manufacturing grew significantly in 1990. Total manufacturing employment increased 1.3 percent, up from 1.0 percent in 1989. Continued strength in the state’s food processing industry contributed to the growth in manufacturing.

Nebraska felt the districtwide slowdown in services last year, but the state’s service sector still managed to expand at a moderate pace. Service sector employment increased 2.4 percent, down from 3.5 percent in 1989.

Nebraska’s economy should continue to grow moderately in 1991, but the pace of economic activity in the state will likely slow with national demand for the goods and services produced in the state. The farm sector will remain a stabilizing force in the state, but the program reforms of the 1990 farm bill may cause some decline in farm income.

Colorado

The Colorado economy maintained moderate economic growth in 1990. Employment growth stayed even with growth in 1989 (Chart 3). But real personal income growth was much slower than in the previous year (Chart 4). Solid performance in nondurable goods manufacturing, services, retail trade, and agriculture balanced weakness in most other sectors of the state’s economy.

Although Colorado’s manufacturing sector weakened overall, nondurable goods production improved. Manufacturing employment increased only 0.1 percent in 1990, down from 1.5 percent in 1989. However, employment growth in nondurable goods industries doubled to 4.3 percent. Food processing and printing and
publishing, in particular, contributed to the growth in nondurable goods industries.

Colorado's mining industry deteriorated somewhat in 1990. Mining employment fell despite improved oil and gas drilling activity and renewed optimism after the reopening of the Climax molybdenum mine was announced. Total mining employment fell 2.7 percent after declining 1.5 percent in 1989.

Colorado construction activity was mixed in 1990. Significant increases in both housing permits and residential construction contract awards during the first three quarters of the year signaled improvement in the residential building sector. In contrast, the nonresidential building sector continued to languish. But office vacancy rates in downtown and suburban Denver continued to fall throughout the year, suggesting the bottom in nonresidential building may have been reached. Total construction employment in Colorado fell slightly in 1990, at about the same rate as in 1989.

The trade and service sectors provided support for the continued overall expansion of the Colorado economy. Tourism—the ski industry in particular—continued to boost the service sector. Retail trade was also a positive factor in the Colorado economy in 1990.

The Colorado economy is likely to post moderate gains again in 1991. Manufacturing in the state may weaken further as defense contracts decline and as national demand for food products slows. But strong farm incomes and tourist dollars should maintain growth in trade and services. The ski industry is optimistic that skier visits will hold up well during the 1990-91 season, as higher oil prices boost incomes in Texas and Oklahoma, two important sources of skiers for Colorado slopes.

**New Mexico**


The mining sector in New Mexico was soft in 1990. Mining employment fell 2.7 percent, after posting solid gains in 1989. The mining job losses occurred despite an increase in oil and gas drilling activity, suggesting continued sluggish conditions in the nonenergy component of the state's mining sector.

New Mexico's manufacturing sector languished in 1990 after healthy growth in 1989. Employment growth in both durable and nondurable goods industries slowed significantly. Some of the slowing occurred in the state's important defense-related industries.

Construction was the weakest segment of New Mexico's economy in 1990. Both residential and nonresidential construction activity declined markedly. For example, a large mixed-use commercial project and convention center expansion were completed in Albuquerque with no new projects to take up the slack. The weakness in building activity led to a significant reduction in the number of construction workers employed in the state.

The service sector continued to lend strength to the New Mexico economy in 1990, although not as much as the year before. Despite a vital tourism industry, which contributed much of the modest growth in services, the trade sector softened. Retail trade was especially anemic—much weaker than in other district states.

The New Mexico economy is expected to grow only slowly in 1991. Stable farm and tourism sectors could partly offset weak manufacturing to prevent further worsening of the state's economy. Moreover, several new building projects, including a large shopping mall in Albuquerque, should breathe some life into the state's sluggish construction sector.
Missouri

Missouri turned in one of the weakest economic performances in the district. Economic performance in Missouri deteriorated markedly in 1990, as manufacturing activity slumped in step with manufacturing activity nationwide. Employment growth decelerated and nonfarm income growth came to a halt (Charts 3 and 4).

Manufacturing in Missouri, dominated by transportation equipment industries, declined in 1990. A downturn in defense-related manufacturing and automobile production contributed to a sizable drop in durable goods employment. Mirroring the nation, total manufacturing employment fell 1.6 percent. The biggest factory layoffs occurred in St. Louis, where much of the state’s manufacturing activity is concentrated. Automobile assembly plants in Kansas City also slowed production considerably during the 1990 model year.

Construction across the state remained weak in 1990, both in the residential and nonresidential sectors. Residential building activity softened further in 1990. Both housing permits and residential contract awards declined during the first three quarters. Moreover, sluggish nonresidential building contributed little strength to the state’s construction sector.

The decline in high-paying factory jobs took a toll on the service and trade sectors in Missouri. Service employment growth was substantially weaker in 1990 than in 1989. And employment in retail and wholesale trade declined after increasing moderately in 1989.

The outlook for the Missouri economy depends critically on the outlook for manufacturing. While some manufacturers may benefit from past declines in the value of the U.S. dollar, a rebound in the state’s important automobile and defense-related industries is not expected. And without improvement in manufacturing, general business conditions in the state will remain weak, postponing significant recovery in the construction sector. Therefore, overall economic performance in Missouri will likely not improve and could slow even further in 1991. Continued strength in the state’s farm economy may cushion the state’s slowdown, however, particularly in rural areas.

Wyoming

Economic growth in Wyoming trailed other district states in 1990. The Wyoming economy turned down in 1990 after posting big gains in 1989. Wyoming employment fell slightly after increasing sharply in 1989 (Chart 3). Although somewhat surprising, such turnarounds can occur in less populous states where small changes in employment levels show up as large changes in growth rates. Strong income in the state’s important ranching industry helped prop up weak growth in nonfarm personal income, which grew much more slowly in 1990 than in 1989 (Chart 4).

Mining and agriculture were both strong in 1990, helping to curb job losses in Wyoming. Mining employment, which showed no gains in 1989, surged nearly 5 percent in 1990. Oil and gas drilling activity and coal production increased. Output of soda ash reached a record high, and bentonite production, used as a lubricant for oil and gas drilling rigs, benefited from the increased drilling activity nationwide.

The construction sector turned in mixed results in 1990. But despite improvements in both residential and nonresidential building activity, construction employment fell. The decline in construction jobs was likely related to a decline in nonbuilding construction activity.

Wyoming’s service and trade sectors slowed. A modest decline in service jobs in 1990 reversed some of the strong gains of the previous year. In addition, retail and wholesale trade employment leveled off after growing soundly in 1989.
Economic performance in Wyoming will likely remain flat in 1991. Continued strong incomes at the state's ranches and further improvement in the mining sector will balance potentially weak manufacturing and service sectors. Tourism, usually a source of stability in the state, may soften if a sluggish national economy reduces visits to the state's national parks.

Summary

The slowing in economic growth in the Tenth Federal Reserve District during 1990 was spread unevenly across the seven district states. In particular, weakness in Missouri—the district's most populous state—dragged down average performance in the district. Most other states, although slowing, performed better than the national average in 1990. The relatively strong regional performance was due to improvements in the energy sector and strong farm incomes.

In the year ahead, the district economy is expected to slow further, reflecting weakness in the national economy. However, the same factors that kept most of the district afloat in 1990 will continue bracing the region in 1991. A strong farm economy and a stable energy sector will likely help the region—excluding Missouri—outpace the nation. In Missouri, a lingering manufacturing downturn is expected to overwhelm strength in the farm economy to push economic performance below the average for the district and the nation. Thus, much of the district may suffer little from the downturn in the national economy. But Missouri, which is roughly a third of the district's economy, will probably share in a national recession.

Endnotes

1 Discussions of employment growth in this article are based on growth for 1989, calculated from the fourth quarter of 1988 to the fourth quarter of 1989; and growth for 1990, calculated as the annual rate of growth from the fourth quarter of 1989 through the third quarter of 1990. The employment data are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, seasonally adjusted at the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.

2 Discussions of income growth in this article are based on growth for 1989, calculated from the fourth quarter of 1988 to the fourth quarter of 1989; and growth for 1990, calculated as the annual rate of growth from the fourth quarter of 1989 to the second quarter of 1990. The income data are seasonally adjusted real personal income data from Data Resources, Inc.

3 Yearend total balances as a percentage of general fund spending is estimated to have increased in Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Wyoming from fiscal year 1989 to fiscal year 1990 (Eckl and others).

References