

Economy Expands At 2 Percent Pace In 3Q

WASHINGTON (AP) — The latest snapshot of economic growth shows the U.S. recovery remains tepid.

Growth in the July-September quarter climbed slightly but was still too weak to stir significantly more hiring. The pace of expansion rose to a 2 percent annual rate from 1.3 percent in the April-June quarter, led by more consumer and government spending.

Voters who are still undecided about the presidential election aren't likely to be swayed by Friday's mixed report from the Commerce Department.

"For the average American, I don't think changes in quarterly GDP" make a big difference in their perception of the economy, said Andrew Kohut, president of the Pew Research Center. "It's certainly good for the president that the number is not bad because that would resonate."

With 11 days until the election, the economy is being kept afloat by a revitalized consumer and the early stages of a housing recovery. But more than three years after the Great Recession ended, the nation continues to struggle because businesses are reluctant to invest, and slower global growth has cut demand for American exports.

Hospital: Reid In Good Condition After Crash

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A hospital spokeswoman says Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is in good condition after an apparent rear-end crash on an interstate through Las Vegas.

University Medical Center spokeswoman Karen Gordon told the Las Vegas Review-Journal his updated condition, but declined to provide specifics on injuries.

Nevada Highway Patrol spokesman Jeremie Elliott says six cars were involved in the chain reaction crash about 1:10 p.m. Friday on Interstate 15.

They include two police vehicles, two civilian vehicles, and two Capitol police vehicles.

The freeway runs parallel to the Las Vegas Strip.



Reid

Shaky Syria truce marred by car bombs

BEIRUT (AP) — Two deadly car bombs and sporadic fighting marred a shaky holiday truce Friday in Syria, although thousands of protesters used the brief respite in the civil war to pour into the streets and demand President Bashar Assad's ouster.

Chants of "Syria wants freedom!" rang out in the streets in the largest demonstrations in months, suggesting that a 19-month-old crackdown and sustained violence has not broken the spirit of those trying to rid the country of Assad's rule.

But even if a cease-fire holds for the intended four-day Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, it's unlikely to be a springboard for ending the conflict that has already claimed more than 35,000 lives.

Syria mediator Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N.-Arab League envoy, has not charted a way forward or said how he would bridge the deep divide between Assad and his opponents. The Syrian president won't resign and the opposition says it won't negotiate a transition deal until he does.

Brahimi's plan marks the first attempt by the international community in six months to scale back the violence that has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and devastated entire neighborhoods. A more comprehensive U.N. cease-fire plan in April quickly collapsed.

Some Voters Just Tuning In, Some Still Mulling

WASHINGTON (AP) — Who are these people who still can't make up their minds? They're undecided voters like Kelly Cox, who spends his days repairing the big rigs that haul central California's walnuts, grapes, milk and more across America.

He doesn't put much faith in either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. But he figures he's got plenty of time — a little more than a week — to settle on one of them before Nov. 6. And he definitely does plan to vote.

"I'll do some online research," said Cox, co-owner of a Delhi, Calif., truck repair shop. "I don't have time to watch presidential debates because it's a lot of garbage anyway. They're not asking the questions that the people want to hear."

About 5 percent of Americans with solid plans to vote have yet to pick their presidential candidate, according to a new AP-GfK poll. When you add in those who lean only tentatively toward their choice or won't declare a favorite, about 16 percent of likely voters look ripe for persuasion. That's about the same as a month ago.

In a super-tight race, undecided voters have taken on almost mythic stature. Their questions at the town hall-style debate are parsed. Campaign techies wade through data to find them. The president dialed up 9,000 of them for an Air Force One conference call as he flew to Los Angeles this week.

Cannibal Cop Case Will Test Lines Of Reality

NEW YORK (AP) — In Internet chats as breezy as they were bizarre, a police officer accused of plotting to kidnap and eat as many as 100 women was once cautioned not to be wasteful when cooking a victim because "there is nearly 75 pounds of food there."

But no one was ever actually harmed in Gilberto Valle's alleged plot, let alone eaten. And a defense attorney says the officer was merely engaging in harmless Internet fantasy.

Where exactly the line is drawn between bizarre talk and a true plot has emerged as the key question in a case that has shocked even the most jaded New Yorkers.

Indeed, experts say many people have a compulsion to create horrific scenarios about cannibalism, and that the Internet allows them to indulge in their dark side anonymously and — usually — safely.

"There is a big difference between discussing, and even fantasizing about this type of activity and actually carrying it out," said Jeffrey Parsons, a psychologist at Hunter College. "Not all the people who fantasize about it will go on to carry it out."

Berlusconi
Convicted
Of Tax Fraud

MILAN (AP) — Just two days after announcing he won't run in spring elections, former Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi was convicted of tax fraud and sentenced to four years in prison Friday in a verdict that could see him barred from public office for five years.

Berlusconi, after dominating Italian politics for nearly two decades, has seen his power weakening in the last year as a sex scandal tarnished his image and he was forced to resign as premier after failing to convince financial markets that he could come up with convincing reforms to shield Italy from Europe's debt woes.

In the latest blow, the 76-year-old billionaire media mogul received the stiffest sentence among the four co-defendants convicted in a scheme that involved inflating the price his media empire paid for TV rights to U.S. movies and pocketing the difference. And the sentence was more than the three years and eight months sought by prosecutors.

Decision 2012

Romney Hits Obama On Economy

BY DAVID ESPO
AND STEVE PEOPLES
Associated Press

AMES, Iowa — Seizing on fresh evidence of economic sluggishness, Republican challenger Mitt Romney said Friday that President Barack Obama inherited a bad situation when he took office and then "made the problem worse." Obama looked ahead to the second term he's hoping to win.

Referring to the two top Republicans in Congress, the president said he was prepared to "wash John Boehner's car" or "walk Mitch McConnell's dog" if it would help complete an elusive deal to cut future deficits by trillions of dollars.

The two campaign rivals faced a common danger as the end of their race came into view: a large and dangerous storm threatening to barrel up the East Coast. Romney and Vice President Joe Biden each canceled planned weekend appearances in Virginia Beach, Va.

Romney was unsparing in his criticism of the man he hopes to unseat. "Despite all that he inherited, President Obama did not repair our economy, he did not save Medicare and Social Security, he did not tame the spending and borrowing, he did not reach across the aisle to bring us together," the former Massachusetts governor said.

"Four years ago, America voted for a post-partisan president, but they have seen the most political of presidents, and a Washington in gridlock because of it," he added.

The Republican challenger borrowed a theme from Obama's successful 2008 campaign, saying he and running mate Paul Ryan



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT

Large numbers of people vote during early voting in Cleveland Friday. Ohio is among 34 states, plus the District of Columbia, where people can vote early.

"can bring real change to this country." And he tweaked a line that former President Bill Clinton unveiled at this summer's Democratic National Convention, saying, "This is not the time to double-down on trickle-down government policies that have failed us."

Democrats delighted in pointing out that Romney spoke outside Kinzler Construction Services, which benefitted from more than \$650,000 in stimulus funding from the 2009 package Obama that signed into law — and the Republican nominee often criticizes.

Romney campaigned in Iowa and Ohio as national polls showed a tight race. Though his aides claimed momentum, citing recent

polls, Obama's team said the president led or was tied in each of the nine battleground states where the two sides have concentrated hundreds of millions of dollars in television commercials over the past five months.

Back in the White House after his long day and night and day of campaigning, Obama said he looked forward to trying to reach a deal with congressional Republicans on a sweeping budget deal if he wins re-election. Asked by radio show host Michael Smerconish if he would make the first move, the president replied, "I've said I'll do whatever's required to get this done."

"And I think the key that the American people want right now is for us to tackle some big chal-

lenges that we face in a commonsense, balanced, sensible way." That was a reference to one of his biggest differences with Romney — his insistence that tax cuts be allowed to expire at upper incomes on Dec. 31, as opposed to Romney's insistence that they be extended.

Obama has been under pressure from Romney in recent days to be more specific about a second-term agenda, and he released a 20-page pamphlet earlier this week. He also had interviews with MTV and several battleground-state television stations on his schedule for the day.

Later, in a live interview with MTV, he urged younger voters to cast their ballots, saying, "there's no excuse" not to.

"In 2000, Gore versus Bush, 537 votes changed the direction of history in a profound way and the same thing could happen," he said. That was Bush's contested margin of victory in Florida, the state that decided the election in a race that went to the Supreme Court.

The two sides disagreed — of course — on whether the political battlefield was expanding.

First Romney, then Obama, launched a modest run of television ads in Minnesota, where neither side had made a significant effort to date. The Republican's aides claimed an opportunity to make a state competitive that had long been counted as safe for Obama. The president's side disputed that, insisting that its ads were aimed at voters in Wisconsin, the battleground next door.

Meningitis Outbreak

FDA Says Pharmacy Knew Of Bacteria

BY MATTHEW PERRONE
AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON — Staffers at a pharmacy linked to the deadly meningitis outbreak documented dozens of cases of mold and bacteria growing in rooms that were supposed to be sterile, according to federal health inspectors.

In a preliminary report on conditions at the pharmacy, the Food and Drug Administration said Friday that even when the contamination at New England Compounding Center exceeded the company's own safety levels, there is no evidence that staffers investigated or corrected the problem. The FDA uncovered some four dozen reports of potential contamination in company records, stretching back to January this year.

The report comes from an FDA inspection of the Framingham, Mass.-based company earlier this month after steroid injections made by the company were tied to an outbreak of fungal meningitis. FDA officials confirmed last week that the black fungus found in the company's vials was the same fungus that has sickened 338 people across the U.S., causing 25 deaths.

The New England Compounding Center's lawyer said Friday the pharmacy "will review our cooperation with the FDA."

Compounding pharmacies like NECC traditionally fill special orders placed by doctors for individual patients, turning out a small number of customized formulas each week. They have traditionally been overseen by state pharmacy boards, though the FDA occasionally steps in when major problems arise. Some pharmacies have grown into much larger businesses in the last 20 years, supplying bulk orders of medicines to hospitals that need a steady supply of drugs on hand.

The FDA report provides new details about NECC's conditions, which were first reported by state officials earlier this week. The drug at the center of the investigation is made without preservative, so it's very important that it be made under highly sterile conditions. Compounding pharmacies prepare their medications in clean rooms, which are supposed to be temperature-controlled and air-filtered to maintain sterility.

But FDA inspectors noted that

workers at the pharmacy turned off the clean room's air conditioning every night. FDA regulators said that could interfere with the conditions needed to prevent bacterial growth.

Inspectors also say they found a host of potential contaminants in or around the pharmacy's clean rooms, including green and yellow residues, water droplets and standing water from a leaking boiler.

Additionally, inspectors found "greenish yellow discoloration" inside an autoclave, a piece of equipment used to sterilize vials and stoppers. In another supposedly sterile room inspectors found a "dark, hair-like discoloration" along the wall. Elsewhere FDA staff said that dust from a nearby recycling facility appeared to be drifting into the pharmacy's rooftop air-conditioning system.

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