The number of Americans filing applications for unemployment benefits rose more than projected last week, showing scant improvement on the outlook for jobs.

Jobless claims increased 15,000 in the week ended Sept. 8, the biggest gain in almost two months, to 382,000, Labor Department figures showed today in Washington. The median forecast of 50 economists surveyed by Bloomberg called for 370,000 claims. Tropical Storm Isaac resulted in about 9,000 applications for benefits, the agency said.

The job market is cooling as a global slowdown and looming U.S. tax policy changes keep businesses hesitant about hiring. Persistent unemployment, a “grave concern” according to Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke, is a focus for policy makers today as they meet to consider whether new steps are needed to boost the world’s biggest economy.

“The labor market continues to be disappointing,” said Guy Berger, a U.S. economist at RBS Securities Inc. in Stamford, Connecticut, who projected claims would rise to 380,000. “We’d like to see the hiring side pick up. Companies are very cautious given all the uncertainty.”

Stock-index futures held earlier losses as investors awaited the Fed’s statement on monetary policy. The contract on the Standard & Poor’s 500 Index expiring this month fell 0.2 percent to 1,436.5 at 8:44 a.m. in New York.

Estimates ranged from 360,000 to 380,000. The Labor Department revised the previous week's figure to 367,000, from an initially reported 365,000.

**Producer Prices**

Another report from the Labor Department showed prices paid to producers climbed 1.7 percent in August, the most since June 2009 and reflecting a surge in energy costs.

The four-week moving average, a less volatile measure than the weekly figures, climbed to 375,000 last week, the highest in almost two months, from 371,750.

Hiring is cooling. Payrolls rose by 96,000 workers in August after a revised 141,000 increase in July that was smaller than initially estimated, the Labor Department said on Sept. 7. Private payrolls, which exclude government agencies, rose 103,000 after a revised gain of 162,000.

Today's report showed the number of people continuing to receive jobless benefits dropped by 49,000 in the week ended Sept. 1 to 3.28 million.

The continuing claims figure does not include the number of Americans receiving extended benefits under federal programs.

**Extended Benefits**

Those who’ve used up their traditional benefits and are now collecting emergency and extended payments decreased by about 41,000 to 2.23 million in the week ended Aug. 25.

The unemployment rate among people eligible for benefits, which tends to track the jobless rate, held at 2.6 percent, where it’s been since the week ended March 17, today’s report showed.

Twenty-nine states and territories reported a decline in claims, while 23 reported an increase. These data are reported with a one-week lag.

Initial jobless claims reflect weekly firings and tend to fall as job growth -- measured by the monthly non-farm payrolls report
Some businesses are still trimming staff. Hewlett-Packard Co. (HPQ), the world’s largest personal-computer maker, this week expanded the total job cuts under its reorganization plan announced in May to 29,000, more than the 27,000 it had originally disclosed. The reductions will take place through fiscal year 2014, the Palo Alto, California-based company said.

The unemployment rate unexpectedly dropped to 8.1 percent, from 8.3 percent, as more Americans left the labor force, the payrolls report also showed last week. The jobless rate has been stuck above 8 percent since February 2009, the longest stretch in monthly records going back to 1948.

“We are watching unemployment, gas prices, GDP, all those other macro things that would impact the consumer’s willingness to spend,” Robert Niblock, chief executive officer of Lowe’s Cos., the second-largest U.S. home-improvement retailer, said at a conference on Sept. 5.

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