



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Arturo Bernal working at the Castle & Cook mushroom plant this morning.

Mushroom plant's familiar odor will soon fade away

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SOQUEL — Roll down your windows. Quit holding your breath. One of Soquel's most famous — certainly its most odoriferous — landmarks, Castle & Cooke Food's mushroom plant, will be closed within six months.

The announcement today from plant manager Ruben Franco was not a complete surprise. The company has been sitting on an approved high-technology industrial park development planned for the 17-acre site for nearly two years.

To be known as Soquel Research Park, the company plans to create 23 industrial lots and either sell them or put the buildings up itself.

Still, the announcement resulted in mixed reactions.

The plant's 215 employees will be out of work. Yet, residents and business owners near the plant are rejoicing, saying their fondest wish has come true.

It is no secret, of course, that the plant spews a manure-like odor over the area. That's to be expected when the mushroom-growing beds consist of 401,000 square feet of horse manure-laced compost.

"We're all smiling," said Gary Benito of Norman's Family Chapel, located next to the mushroom plant. Added Ruben Granlund, manager of nearby Rodeo Mobile Estates: "It'll certainly be a happy day around here when it closes."

Even First (Soquel-Live Oak) District

Supervisor Dan Forbus is happy the decision to close finally came.

"It's been a source of irritation for quite some time," Forbus said, in noting he has received hundreds of complaints about the odor during his nearly two decades in office.

He called the job situation "a wash." Forbus said that while the industrial park development "won't offer the same type of jobs as the mushroom plant, it at least won't be one of those closings where new employment opportunities aren't there."

Soquel Chamber of Commerce spokesman Dave Tunno agreed, saying the community will benefit by clean industry and added employment. He also lauded Castle

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& Cooke for actively participating in Soquel events throughout the years.

One group of people not happy about the closure, however, is the United Farm Workers, which represents most of the employees at the plant.

"We don't agree with the closure at all," said Oscar Medina, crop manager at the UFW'S Watsonville office.

While the plant's employees knew of the company's plans, Medina said, there was always a feeling "that it might not happen."

Plant manager Franco told The Sentinel they will soon be meeting with the UFW to discuss the closing. He said it was Castle & Cooke's intention to do what it could to find new jobs for the displaced workers — either at other company operations or other similar work in the area.

Castle & Cooke also has mushroom plants in Ventura, Salem, Ore., and

Fillmore, Utah.

Some 10 million pounds of mushrooms a year are grown at the Soquel plant, according to Franco. He said the 50 million pounds produced at the company's four plants make it the largest mushroom grower in the 11 Western states.

The Soquel plant is being closed because the alternate industrial use of the property will allow the company to recover its investment in the property. Such a step is in line with Castle & Cooke's announced policy of converting its assets to cash whenever possible.

Castle & Cooke will continue to operate a small mushroom spawn plant in Soquel. That operation would employ approximately 25 people.

The plant was originally built by the West family in 1951 and became known as West Foods. Castle & Cooke, a subsidiary of Dole Pineapples and Bud of California lettuce, bought the plant 11 years ago.