

WATSONVILLE - GENERAL 1990 -

# Vegetable plant jobs may be on thin ice

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Frost damage to the broccoli crop of the Salinas Valley has cast some uncertainty over workers for Watsonville's frozen-vegetable plants.

Nearly 2,500 people found work in three Watsonville frozen-vegetable plants last year when the broccoli harvest began to peak in March and April. But this year, compounding the loss of nearly 400 jobs at the local Green Giant plant, will be what type of broccoli harvest there is in the next three months.

Norcal/Crosetti's Frozen Foods, the second largest employer in Watsonville, cut down production dramatically right after the freeze, then virtually shut

down the first two weeks of January. The firm had expected before the freeze to employ 200 workers on the broccoli lines this month. On Monday, it started some broccoli production.

At Shaw's Frozen Foods, the largest firm in Watsonville, 250 employees processed a delayed Brussels sprouts harvest. But broccoli production was postponed, and freeze damage will make work more sporadic for months to come.

"We're going to experience the impact of the frost for the next four months," said Byron Johnson, Shaw's executive vice president. "Instead of coming in sequentially, the crop is going to bunch up. We'll have peaks and valleys, and nobody knows if the valleys

are going to last a day or a week."

Monterey County agricultural officials are concerned that there could be a two-week gap in the harvest. That could come because of the young plants put in the ground right before the freeze. Those plants would have matured in early April.

"Some of our growers are predicting a hole in our broccoli production the first two weeks in April," said Wallace Marvin, Monterey County agricultural commissioner. "We have estimated that there may have been as much as 12,000 acres of broccoli in the ground when the freeze hit. Out of that 12,000 acres, we're estimating 60 percent damage at a cost of \$4.2 million."

The uncertainty of the broccoli har-

vest makes prospects even dimmer for the 380 Green Giant workers who are scheduled to hit the unemployment lines Friday.

"I think it looks bleak," said Tad Kimoto, manager of the Watsonville Employment Development Department. "I don't know right now where they are going to find work. Probably nowhere."

The freeze and the Green Giant layoffs come on the heels of an already troubled winter for the Watsonville economy: In the last three months, 9,500 claims have been filed at the Watsonville unemployment office, Kimoto said, compared with 8,798 claims in the three months following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.