

Jobless rate here drops by 15 percent

Unemployment in Watsonville dropped sharply — by 15 percent — in January.

Arnold Hamilton, manager of the Employment Development Department office on Arthur Road, said 15,354 weeks' worth of unemployment claims were paid by the local office in January; the figure in January 1983 was 18,140 weeks.

Hamilton said the warm, dry weather in January was a factor in putting many people back to work. "The growers indicated there was more work going on in the fields (than last January)," he said, noting that in winter, more than 50 percent of the unemployment claims are in agriculture-related work.

Richard Shaw, owner of the frozen foods firm that bears his name, said employment at his plant was up about 20 percent in January as compared to Janu-

ary 1983. He, too, cited weather as the key factor in the increase.

Another possible reason for the decrease in claims was the rule requiring those filing for unemployment to prove citizenship or legal alien status. That rule was in effect for two months before it was rescinded last week.

Hamilton said "a very small number" of claims were denied at his office because of inability to prove legal status. He added, however, that he had no way of knowing how many people simply didn't apply because they knew they couldn't qualify.

One factor influencing the number of unemployment claims is how many seasonal workers return to Mexico for the winter.

A year ago, when the value of the Mexican peso tumbled, many local workers who traditionally returned to Mexico stayed here. "We know that because they told us," Hamilton said.

Carlos Rico, owner of La Flor del Valle market on Union Street, whose clientele includes a number of seasonal workers, said more people are going back this winter than last. He said those who are able to save some money here can live well in Mexico, where the dollar buys about 160 pesos; it was about 100 pesos to the dollar a year ago.

While more are going back, there are still many workers staying and more new ones coming from Mexico every year, Rico said. "The weather has a lot to do with it," he said.