

Fewer Green Giant layoffs don't lessen impact

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Some 270 Pillsbury/Green Giant workers will lose their jobs Friday — 102 fewer than the frozen-food company's original estimate of 382.

At the same time, the production manager for a competitor of Pillsbury/Green Giant — Robert Farrens at Norcal Crosetti Foods — said Wednesday that his company is hiring production line workers, but is having a difficult time filling slots.

"As far as I know, I don't think any Pillsbury people have been here to fill out an application," Farrens said.

The numbers discrepancy at Pillsbury/Green Giant is primarily a result of workers that opted for early retirement, said Terry Thompson, vice president of public relations for Pillsbury/Green Giant at its Minneapolis headquarters.

Due to economics, the company is shifting most of its production to plants in Mexico and Ohio. A \$1.4-million job-retraining program, as well as a severance package worth more than \$2 million, is being provided by Pillsbury/Green Giant.

But the company also isn't pulling out of Watsonville, said both Thompson and local plant manager Duane Larson. "We're here to stay," said Larson, pointing to the fact that they'll keep 120 workers and are investing \$3.5 million in new equipment.

According to Thompson, the numbers discrepancy occurred when 61 workers eligible for early retirement opted to take it. They will get a \$1,000 lump-sum payment and a monthly pension. Another 51 were seasonal workers who were counted in the first go-round, but weren't around when hiring began in the fall. Those workers are believed to have gotten other jobs or moved out of the area.

Whatever the number, it hasn't lessened the fear and anger on the part of workers, and their union — Teamsters Union Local 912. The Committee for Displaced Green Giant Workers will hold a demonstration in front of the West Beach Street plant at noon Friday.

Teamsters' president Joe Fahey on Wednesday called the company's 270 layoff number a "definitional question."

"There's going to be 382 fewer jobs," Fahey said. "Many of those opting for early retirement are still going to seek jobs elsewhere. The others were seasonal workers who bailed out as soon as they heard their jobs were going to be eliminated."

"This numbers thing is consistent with the Green Giant public-relations stance, which is to minimize the impact of them running away to Mexico," he added.

Thompson disagreed, saying, "We are not robber barons. Companies all around us have given no

notice, no severance and just said 'good-bye' to hundreds of workers. This company is doing a heck of a lot more than many companies in central California."

However, Thompson also wants to focus on the positive, pointing to the job-retraining program in which a projected 80 percent of the displaced workers are expected to find other jobs locally. The job-retraining program is primarily focusing on teaching workers new skills beyond the field of agriculture.

Fahey is skeptical about the 80 percent jobs' projection saying, "I just don't see where in the county they're going to work." Teamsters' secretary-treasurer Sergio Lopez added, "As much as I pray, I don't

know what will happen to these people three months down the road."

Thompson prefers to leave the job projections to the experts. "I feel good (about the projection) because I talk to the experts who make their living doing this. I respect these consultants, and am not interested in backing off that 80 percent projection."

It's also a good possibility that some of those laid-off workers will be rehired — albeit, on a seasonal basis — by Pillsbury/Green Giant on Monday, said plant manager Duane Larson on Wednesday. Larson said the arctic freeze that hit California in late December has delayed this year's broccoli-packing

season, but he still expects to hire between 50 and 70 workers through April.

That arctic freeze, which damaged or killed much of the broccoli in fields, has also caused a delay for other area food-processing plants.

Norcal-Crosetti's Farrens said their broccoli line has been delayed 90 days. He expects to start processing broccoli around March 15.

The whole scenario has meant only one thing to soon-to-be laid off workers Lauro and Yolanda Navarro, Anolfo Gomez, Gloria Zamudio and Mikaela Savala: they'll be out of a long-time, good-paying job. Pillsbury workers average 14 years

with the company at an average pay of \$8 an hour.

"We think it's unjust," said Lauro Navarro, who has worked for the company for 13 years. "They're not being fair to all the workers who have been loyal to them. Now, they're just going for the money."

For Lauro, whose wife also works for Pillsbury/Green Giant, the layoff is a double-whammy. Neither have new jobs lined up, although both will participate in the job-retraining program.

That program, under provisions of the federally sponsored Job Training Partnership Program, will provide \$1.4 million to pay for most of the retraining. Pillsbury/Green Giant is donating the classroom space at the plant for

the retraining.

Also, the company's \$2 million-plus severance package is described as "unprecedented" by union officials because, for the first time, seasonal workers are included.

According to Lopez, full-time employees will be given one week's pay for every year of service, and two weeks pay for every year after 20 years. Seasonal workers will get half-week's pay for every year they've worked up to 10 years, and three-quarter week's pay for every year up to 20 years. Medical benefits are also included.

But, Fahey added, "There's no severance package that replaces somebody's job."