

Plant closing met with dismay

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Yesterday's announcement that the Green Giant frozen food plant will be closing at the end of this year was met with dismay by the union that represents most of the plant's 235 workers.

"We are totally appalled by this decision," said Teamsters Local 912 yesterday afternoon in a press release.

"Once again, we were surprised! They don't care about how this affects our members or the community as a whole," the union said.

"We will be meeting with our people and do everything to demand retraining and make sure that the people are reemployable, not like 1990.

"There are still many of those people out of work," the union added. "At that time, the company also led people to believe they were paying for this retraining when, in fact, it was sponsored by the state of California."

Teamsters Local 912 business agent Chavelo Moreno said that although Green Giant claimed a 60 percent re-employment rate for those laid off in 1990, many took jobs at lesser pay rates and there are still hundreds unemployed.

Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios said the plant's closure will mean new hardships for the city as a whole, but the real impact will be felt by the workers who will be losing their jobs.

Rios said he intends to dis-

cuss plans tonight at the City Council meeting to get the council to develop a strategy for handling plant closures.

He also wants to call a meeting, possibly next week, between the county and Pillsbury to discuss job training for the soon-to-be laid-off workers.

The community and the other employers will feel the impact of Green Giant's closing through high utility bills and fees, Rios added. The charges paid by Green Giant will have to be made up elsewhere.

Grand Metropolitan PLC, the British-owned holding company that owns Pillsbury, said yesterday it will eliminate 3,000 jobs worldwide, most of them at its Green Giant vegetable business

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and Pearle optical stores.

Although the plant's closing will mean the loss of 235 jobs to Watsonville and the surrounding area, the plant's impact on the local farming scene has been minimal for several years.

Since its remodeling in 1990 and a massive layoff that idled two-thirds of its work force, the plant has been processing only spinach and Brussels sprouts and repacking corn and mixed vegetables.

Brussels sprout grower Steve Bontadelli said this morning, "The die was set three years ago when Green Giant moved most of their operations out.

"All they were doing is Brussels sprouts, spinach and re-pack," Bontadelli added.

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau president Kirk Schmidt

agreed. "Green Giant is a shadow of what it once was," he said.

The company this year packed about 1 million pounds of Brussels sprouts — about 2½ percent of the 40 million pounds that are grown annually in the Santa Cruz County-North Coast area.

Michael Shaeffer, Green Giant's vice president of operations, said yesterday the company will aggressively seek a buyer for the Watsonville plant — someone who will keep the plant open.

Bontadelli and Schmidt today viewed that announcement with skepticism.

"The frozen food industry is not in good shape today," said Bontadelli, "and in no way, shape or form is it something you will see someone jumping into."

Schmidt said the contract

Green Giant negotiated several years ago with the Teamsters Union to forestall a strike that wracked its major competitors — Watsonville Canning and Crosetti (now combined into NorCal/Crosetti) and the Shaw company — might be transferred to a new plant owner.

That contract called for Green Giant to pay its workers the highest wages in the Valley, something that Schmidt believes will give second thoughts to any would-be buyer of the Green Giant plant.

Moreno said the union wouldn't necessarily stand in the way of a new company coming to Watsonville and operating the Green Giant facility.

"The union will not get in the way of a new company," he said. "The union is always willing to sit down and negotiate with any company willing to operate the plant."