

It's time to save the golden goose



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— *Marijke Rowland
The Modesto Bee*



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NUMMI's demise cuts 300 from this county plus 186 at Modesto supplier

By Marijke Rowland

The first major ripple in what is expected to be a wave of layoffs and cutbacks caused by the upcoming shutdown of New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. has hit Modesto.

Trim Masters Inc. will lay off all its 186 employees when the plant closes March 31, according to a Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, or WARN, notice, sent to the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors last week.

The company supplies interior door panels for Toyota Tacomas produced at the Fremont NUMMI plant, which also will shut down March 31.

The NUMMI plant employs about 4,500 workers, who all will lose their jobs. Across the state, about 15,500 jobs at suppliers are expected to be eliminated.

In Stanislaus County, the Economic Development and Workforce Alliance has identified 300 county residents who work at the Fremont plant. Those impending losses, coupled with a tight job market and a 17.5 percent unemployment rate in the county, make for a grim employment picture heading into spring.

Workers at Trim Masters already know how NUMMI will affect them.

"Everyone is worried," said Trim Masters employee Ralph Espinoza, who has been with the company three years. "I know finding another job that pays like this in Modesto will be difficult."

Calls to Trim Masters in Modesto were referred to corporate headquarters in Kentucky. Numerous calls to the corporate office were not returned.

The WARN notice says "all of the workers at the facility are being terminated as a result of this plant closing." Of the 186 employees, 154 are production members, 15 are office staff, 10 are maintenance crew and seven are managers.

Workers at the Modesto plant, at Yosemite Boulevard and McClure Road, were informed Jan. 29 of the closure. The company laid off 83 workers last spring because of slowed production at Fremont. But in the summer, the company was able to rehire about 50 people.

At the time, corporate officials were optimistic that the Modesto facility might continue to supply a plant in Mexico.

Since the closure was announced, the Workforce Alli-

ance has been working with Trim Masters to help its soon-to-be jobless.

Paula O'Leary, a business services representative at the alliance, said she plans to visit the plant starting early next month to hold a series of informational meetings. An official from the state Economic Development Department will come to help workers navigate the unemployment application process.

"For what we're already going through as far as unemployment, this is going to be a large hit," O'Leary said. "The jobs aren't coming back as fast as they are disappearing."

Jeff Michael, director of the Business Forecasting Center at the University of the Pacific, has been tracking the potential impact of the NUMMI plant closure in the Central Valley. He said its shutdown could skew the area's high unemployment rate at a time of year when the jobs picture typically begins to perk up thanks to seasonal farmwork.

"The big looming thing is this NUMMI closure; it's still out there," he said. "We know it is coming. We know there are going to be impacts here. It's hard to say whether they will be enormous, but they will be something."