

Hundreds lose jobs in aftermath of processing plant fire

Shearer's Foods lays off employees of destroyed Hermiston plant

By **ERICK PETERSON**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The devastating fire last month at the Shearer's Foods facility in Hermiston has led the company to end employment of the men and women who worked there. And the city is without a sure sign the company will rebuild.

Shearer's Foods CEO Bill Nictakis made the announcement in a press release Tuesday, March 8.

"After assessing the damage, it's clear that the destruction is too great to quickly rebuild and begin production in the near term," according to Nictakis. "Unfortunately, it would take at least 15-18 months before we could resume production. We have not yet decided the future of the Shearer's Hermiston site. This has led to the very difficult decision to end employment for our team members."

The company has reported it employed 230 people at the plant.

Nictakis stated the company is "exploring opportunities to relocate team members interested in working in our other plants" and has "provided a severance and benefits continuation package to recognize the effort and tenure that has gone into making the site successful over the past years."

He continued, "We will do everything we can to support our Shearer's family during this transition."

According to the press release, Shearer's Foods has been teaming up with community organizations on projects, including food drives, family activities and job fairs, to benefit its former employees.

"We will continue to provide counseling services to those affected and will do what we can to help them find other employment," the release stated.

Nictakis ended the statement with thanks to local businesses and government representatives for their support, adding, "Please continue to put our Shearer's Hermiston family in your thoughts through this difficult time."

Dealing with the fallout

This is a situation that has driven people to tears, according to Mark



Two days after an explosion and fire, the wreckage of the Shearer's Foods facility continues to smolder Feb. 24, 2022. Shearer's Foods CEO Bill Nictakis announced Tuesday, March 8, the company cannot quickly rebuild the facility and ended the employment of the 230 people who worked there.



Shearer's Foods was virtually unrecognizable Feb. 23, 2022, following the explosion and fire Feb. 22. On Tuesday, March 8, a statement from the company said it is "exploring opportunities to relocate team members interested in working in our other plants" and has "provided a severance and benefits continuation package to recognize the effort and tenure that has gone into making the site successful over the past years."

Gomolski, Agape House director.

Gomolski said Shearer's supplied Agape House with a list of all of the Hermiston plant employees, and the nonprofit held a food drive Friday, March 4, for them. Gomolski said CAPECO — Community Action Program of East Central Oregon — and the Oregon Food Bank supplied the food for the laid-off employees.

Large pallets of food lined the west end of the building going around to the east end on March 4, Gomolski said. The Shearer workers arrived at the Agape House, opened their vehicles and had them filled.

There were 35 volunteers, Gomolski said, and seven of the volunteers came from Shearer's.

The event, which ran from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., provided food to 127 Shearer's families, and many of these people seemed very upset, Gomolski said.

"There were people crying as they were getting food here," he said.

Gomolski said there is a possibility of holding another food drive in April.

Job fair coming next week

Since the start of the fire, local government has been in

"There are some really large companies out there that are literally begging for employees."

— Craig Smith, of Food Northwest

communication with Shearer's to see what can be done. Mark Morgan, Hermiston assistant city manager, is one of those officials who has expressed a desire to help.

"We've been in coordination with the Shearer's folks, as well as all of our other partners here on the state, local and federal level," he said.

Morgan said the city has been working with the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce on its planned job fair. He said planning for the fair was delayed while waiting to find out whether Shearer's would hold on to its employees and rebuild. Now that Shearer's released those employees, the city and the chamber are pushing forward with the job fair.

"I've been in touch with all the wonderful companies in Hermiston," Val Hoxie, executive director of the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce, said, as she helped organize the fair.

On the afternoon of March 8, she said 14 employers confirmed participation at the fair, and she

said she expects more to join. Some participating companies, which will be looking for new employees, are Lamb Weston, Amazon, Tillamook, Rogers Toyota of Hermiston and Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla.

The job fair is March 16, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Hermiston Community Center, 415 S. Highway 395.

Hoxie said Workforce will be present, too, as representatives will be on hand to answer questions about unemployment issues.

Employees are entering a strong job market

Former Shearer's workers may not be looking long for work, according to Craig Smith of Food Northwest.

He said Food Northwest did not have an association with Shearer's. It does, however, have connections with several other local food processors around the region. Already, he said, he has heard a lot of eagerness in hiring the Shearer's workforce.

"We have a lot of companies in that area that are looking for people," he said, including Lamb Weston, Port of Morrow, Boardman Foods, Tillamook and Oregon Potato.

"There are some really large companies out there that are literally begging for employees," he said.

He said the misfortune of losing jobs could become opportunities for people to find something new and better.

Hermiston looks to the future and recovery

Morgan expressed confidence the displaced laborers would find new work at the upcoming fair.

"I know there's been significant interest from employers looking to hire some of these folks coming out of the Shearer's facility," Morgan said.

The assistant city manager also articulated his belief the community will recover.

"We're strongly committed to making sure that we can see some reinvestment here in the community and that type of operation here as quickly as possible," he said.

He also plugged Hermiston as an excellent place for business.

"I think it's proven that our region has some of the best workforce," he said, "as well as assets in the form of water and utilities needed for processing operations."

Hermiston students earn national recognition for TV program

By **ERICK PETERSON**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — An Armand Larive Middle School teacher and a handful of students busied themselves earlier this month with the production of a TV broadcast.

They set up lights, turned on a teleprompter and took to their spots. When everyone, and everything, was ready, a young producer cued her anchors, and they began presenting the news.

"Good morning, Bullpups," one student anchor announced.

Thus, Armand Larive Television, the student-created program of the Hermiston middle school, started another show.

ALTV produces and broadcasts morning student announcements, which it transmits to all of the school's students in their classrooms. On occasion, ALTV livestreams Bullpup sporting events. The students also create a monthly storytelling show in which they interview interesting people and present these interviews as in-depth stories.

"You can call it a middle-school version of '60 Minutes,'" Rob Doherty, Armand broadcasting adviser and teacher, said of the storytelling programs.

Recently, ALTV did more than present the news; it became the news. The Student Television Network Convention awarded ALTV with second place in the Broadcast Excellence com-



Armand Larive Middle School students and their instructor, Rob Doherty, begin a broadcast recording March 1, 2022. The class recently won national recognition for one of its shows.

petition for a Christmas program.

The episode included stories on Christmas spirit, women in science and foster parents who are making a difference.

"This is a big deal," Doherty said of the placing.

ALTV's history began in 1997, starting as a school club that created weekly announcements for

students. It has undergone changes since, growing in recent years. Doherty said the second-place victory was the highest placing ever for ALTV. He said he has more than 150 students a day involved in the program. These students rotate in and out to study and practice journalism, the adviser said.

In addition to adding students, ALTV has accu-

mulated technology. Doherty said in 2012, ALTV had only one camera. Now, it has 12, as well as other equipment — microphones and a formal setup for the broadcasts.

The shows, dating to 2012, are available to watch on the ALTV website, altv.us.

Doherty expressed pride in his students,



Armand Larive Television broadcasters pose with their recent award March 1, 2022. Back row from left: Juliette Goyer Rondon, Sofia Rodriguez, Aspyn Inners and Naima Velasco. Front row from left: Jaideny Orozco and Matea Sepulveda.

who not only created an award-winning product; they did it on their own.

"I didn't help the students put that show

together," Doherty said of the particular program that won second place.

"They did it entirely by themselves."

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Union County Business Grants Available

The 2022 Union County Business Assistance Grant Program is currently accepting applications from small businesses financially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligible applicants may receive up to \$10,000.

Applications, eligibility requirements, and additional information is available on the Union County website at www.union-county.org or by calling 541-963-1001. Completed and signed applications packets must be received via email at bizgrant@union-county.org or hand delivered to 1106 K Avenue by 12:00 noon on Friday, April 1, 2022.

This grant program is being made available due to federal funding received from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund.