

Reynolds plans to idle 135 workers

by SCOTT MAGUIRE
of The Outlook staff

TROUTDALE — About 135 people will be laid off this week as Reynolds Metals unplugs one of its aluminum smelters, union officials said Tuesday.

The layoffs coincide with the July 1 end of a special power price offered to Northwest aluminum producers by the Bonneville Power Administration. In March when the special rate was announced, Reynolds officials said the temporary rate relief stalled the shutdown of one smelting line.

The BPA will have a press conference at 1:30 today on future options to reduce power costs to the aluminum industry.

Meanwhile, workers at the Troutdale Reynolds plant have been notified that layoffs are imminent.

"I got a call today that one line was going down," said Larry Pinkley, president of local 330 of the United Steel Workers of America.

The notice was posted at the Troutdale smelter at about 1 p.m. Tuesday. Pinkley got his call from a secretary at the plant about that time.

Don Jenkins, Troutdale plant manager, contacted at home late Tuesday, refused to comment until today. Officials at the Northwest offices for Reynolds refused to comment, deferring to Joe Moffatt, public relations manager, who was not available for comment.

Coupled with the Troutdale layoffs is a similar action at Reynolds Metal's smelter in Longview, Wash. A night guard who answered the telephone there Tuesday said a layoff notice was posted for about 25 workers plus all the plant's summer help.

Additional questions would not be answered until personnel officials come to work at 8 a.m. Wednesday, the guard said.

The Troutdale layoffs will affect members of all seven unions at the plant and may be followed soon by management layoffs, Pinkley said. Besides the steel workers, Reynolds employees belong to unions

representing blacksmiths, painters, machinists, electricians, teamsters and chemical workers.

Reynolds production and employment has been rolling like a roller coaster since October 1981. The most recent layoffs came about a year ago when two of the plant's five smelters were unplugged and about 225 hourly workers laid off.

Prior to that, the plant ran at full capacity from December 1983 to July 1984, with about 900 people working there.

The Troutdale smelter hit a low in August 1982 when only one smelter was operating. At that time, the plant had about 340 people working, with about 600 others laid off.

This layoff will take people with less than 10 years of seniority, said Pinkley. There will be some shuffling of shifts to get all the senior union members consolidated on the newest smelter and one other, he said. The plant operates the smelters 24-hours a day.

"It has been in the works for the last six months,"

Pinkley said, admitting he wasn't surprised by the announcement. "The power rates are hurting us and so is the low price of aluminum."

A special discount offered by the Bonneville Power Administration helped Reynolds to cut its power costs for a year. The BPA offered two six-month special rates in a row, giving the smelter a 23 percent discount.

However, those rates have been replaced by a long-term rate package that is only about 8 percent lower than 1984 rates. Reynolds officials say they want rates to drop from the present 2.5 cents per kilowatt hour to 1.7 cents per kilowatt hour, which is the world average.

The BPA is considering alternatives to the presents rate structure, such as tying the price of power to the world price for aluminum as reflected in the London Metals Exchange.

Another option under study is BPA-financed modernization of aluminum plants. BPA will also consider letting aluminum firms buy power from other areas, such as Canada, which still has cheap hydroelectric power.

Sea birds possible bane of salmon

by DAN GUTHRIE

Upwards of 30 million juvenile salmon survive the trip down the Columbia River each year. Then, somewhere beyond its mouth, while still in the river's freshwater plume or near shore in the salt sea, the majority of them disappear within three to four months.

Some fisheries experts fear the juveniles may be starving to death. Hatcheries, they say, are exhausting food resources by saturating near-shore waters with smolts.

Other experts say the smolts die because they are unprepared physiologically for salt water. Either hatcheries upset the timing of the salmon's journey, causing them to reach the Pacific prematurely before cells in their gills are primed to pump out the sudden influx of salts, or the fish are delayed by slackwater reservoirs and arrive at the Pacific after the allure of the sea has waned.

Still others, notably biologist Dan Varoujean with the University of Oregon's Institute of Marine Biology at Charleston, suggest that sea birds might be behind the disappearance of the salmon. Especially suspicious are the hordes of common murre found along the Oregon coast from April through July.

"We have information on the diets of murre near Coos Bay dating back to 1977," said Varoujean when we spoke last week. "From '77 through '79 we didn't find any salmonids in their stomachs."

"In 1980, Ore-Aqua (Oregon's largest salmon ranching concern) stepped up its release of coho smolts, and a few of these appeared in the guts of murre."

He continued, "Then, in 1981, the number of smolts taken by each murre went up dramatically, and there were more murre converging on Coos Bay."

Varoujean found that the murre were eating as many as 28,000 juvenile salmon per day between late April and mid-July. From the jaws of the Coos Bay jetty to the waters several miles offshore, these penguinsque sea birds flew through the water in pursuit of smolts. Up the coast in Newport they appeared to be feasting similarly on Ore-Aqua releases into Yaquina Bay.

In 1979, Varoujean and his team carried out the only modern census of Oregon's murre populations. They determined that approximately 330,000 of them breed along the coast. Since each bird eats more than half a pound of food per day, altogether they accounted for about 30 million pounds of fish and squid from April through July.

Preferred foods for the murre ranged from juvenile rockfish in early April, to Pacific tomcod, whitebait smelt and squid from May through July. Never were salmon among their top favorites.

"I don't think anyone else has ever reported juvenile salmon in the guts

of murre," said Varoujean.

There were two consequences of the diet and population studies. Ore-Aqua began a program to barge its juvenile salmon offshore 10 or more miles and release them beyond the range of murre, and Varoujean was called in to find out whether murre were annihilating Columbia River salmon.

"We did the preliminary research in 1982, when we found that murre were taking around 140,000 juvenile salmon off the mouth of the Columbia," said Varoujean.

"That's not many fish out of the 30 million produced by the system. However, you have to realize 1982 was a year of strong upwelling that brought cold water rich in nutrients and the species murre prefer: tomcod and smelt. In warmwater years those species go elsewhere. That's when the birds might turn to salmon."

Such a year was 1983 when the infamous El Nino made its mark on Northwest fisheries. But Varoujean missed sampling it for want of the funds needed to test his theory. Neither did he sample in 1984, another year poor in the cold upwellings and research dollars.

But 1985 saw him sampling waters off the Columbia, and he has just returned from a nine-day expedition during the peak of the chinook and coho outmigrations. In the bellies of the birds that he collected may reside proof that, at least in times of limited upwelling, sea birds are the band of juvenile salmon. The results will be announced by the end of summer, and they may implicate more than one kind of bird.

"We found tremendous numbers of sooty shearwaters as well as murre," said Varoujean. The shearwaters nest on islands off Australia and New Zealand during the austral summer, then migrate to the North Pacific to take advantage of our summer. Like their albatross cousins, they are great soarers and fishers.

"There were tens of thousands off Seaside within three to 10 miles of shore. You could almost walk on them. By mid-summer their numbers will exceed three million," said Varoujean.

If the sea birds actually are responsible for leveling salmon runs at the ocean's doorstep, there is some question whether they feast more on hatchery fish released in a single burst or wild fish that arrive at the mouth of the Columbia over a protracted season.

Advocates of the hatchery strategy say sending smolts through the battery of sea birds sacrifices only the outer segment and allows the rest of the population to advance safely into deeper water, whereas wild fish that straggle into the Pacific over several months suffer greater losses.

"That's called the 'predator swamping theory.' My thinking goes just the opposite of it," said Varoujean.

"Sea birds are skilled at taking advantage of an ephemeral food source. Murre, for example, assess how well their neighbors have done when they return to the breeding colony to feed their young. The most successful birds are then followed back to the best fishing grounds. So it doesn't take more than a day or two for the population to converge on a passing school and deplete it."

"In contrast, if smolt densities are low, the proportion of them in the guts of murre and other sea birds

also will be low. This means that juvenile salmon arriving at the mouth of the Columbia over a long period will have a higher survival rate."

Varoujean emphasizes there are two ready solutions to the problem of sea bird predation: barge fish out to sea and release hatchery fish from more sites over a longer period

Dan Guthrie writes on Columbia Basin fish and wildlife issues for the Oregon State University Extension-Sea Grant Program.

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