

Clarkston mill to close indefinitely

Operations scheduled to shut down in two months and won't resume until lumber prices improve

By Elaine Williams of the Tribune

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Kyle Mills / Lewiston Tribune

A loader moves logs at Guy Bennett Lumber at the Port of Wilma west of Clarkston. The company has given its 70 employees notice it will begin curtailing operations indefinitely in early June.



Kyle Mills / Lewiston Tribune

Guy Bennett Lumber located at the Port of Wilma is ceasing operations in about 60 days, hoping to reopen when prices improve.

Guy Bennett Lumber in Clarkston has notified its 70 employees that it will begin the process of curtailing its operations indefinitely in about two months.

Once the company exhausts its supply of logs in early June, it doesn't appear it will be able to purchase any more at prices where the company would do anything other than lose money after they were turned into lumber, said Mitch Dimke, general manager of Guy Bennett Lumber in Clarkston.

Plus, Guy Bennett Lumber has historically purchased its logs from private landowners and they're reluctant to sell since log prices are low, Dimke said.

"Due to the continuation of the poor housing market and the overall economy, it's tough to determine at this time exactly how long we could be down," according to the employee notification. "We will continue to monitor the market on (a) weekly (basis) and hopefully the layoff will only be for a short period of time."

Guy Bennett Lumber already tried other measures, such as cutting its night shift and then going to a 32-hour week for remaining employees.

This is the first time in the history of the mill, which started as a fruit box maker in 1939, that it's been idled indefinitely.

The decision has no effect on Bennett Lumber Products in Princeton at this point, which is owned by the same family. That operation was reduced to about 120 employees in January, when it cut 30 to 35 jobs as it eliminated its night shift.

Slow housing starts have deflated lumber prices and created unprecedented problems for every lumber mill in north central Idaho and southeastern Washington.

February housing starts were 47 percent lower than in 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

A spokesman for Clearwater Paper, which runs the largest lumber mill in the region, recently described markets for lumber as being some of the worst in 50 years and said officials at his company didn't believe a significant recovery would occur in 2009.

Those comments were made in a story about Clearwater Paper taking two weeks of downtime ending Friday that affected 270 employees, after already moving to 30-hour work weeks in January.

Three Rivers Timber in Kamiah is in the process of selecting a buyer for its plant after it quit production and defaulted on loans to Wells Fargo Bank. Tri Pro Forest at Konkolville near Orofino has taken downtime in recent months and the Idaho Forest Group in Grangeville eliminated seven of 152 employees.

The owners of Guy Bennett want the plant to be down just for a short time. They said they are fully aware of the effect the company's decision had on its staff. Dimke was the one who went department by department and told employees - some of whom have worked at Bennett for decades - about the suspension of operations. "I have never (had) anything more difficult."

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