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Sawmill layoffs topple a way of life

mlundstrom@sacbee.com

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QUINCY – Even at 3 a.m., when his shift begins, Don Tidwell savors the smell of his job.

In the darkness and in the daylight, the odor clings to the buildings and ground and mountain air, saturating the senses.

"Sugar pine smell," explains Tidwell, a 32-year-old father of four. "You know, fresh lumber-mill smell."

That simple workplace pleasure has come to an abrupt end for Tidwell and 149 other men and women, who lost their jobs at the Sierra Pacific Industries sawmill in Quincy.

Monday's official closure of the small-log mill in Quincy, 146 miles northeast of Sacramento, is part of a wave of mill closures, layoffs and shift reductions in California announced by the timber giant since Jan. 1.

While the Anderson-based company will completely shutter its mills in Camino and Sonora this summer – costing another 310 jobs – the sawmill in the remote mountain town of Quincy will only partially close. Effective Monday, the section of the mill that cuts small-diameter logs will cease operations.

Who and what is to blame for the cascading job losses is a contentious debate involving the timber industry, environmentalists, the federal government and the people of Plumas County.

This much is undisputed: The loss of 150 jobs from the county's largest private employer is hitting an isolated mountain region that already has one of the state's highest unemployment rates, at 20.1 percent. Suddenly, the work force of about 320 – now cut nearly in half – must face the harsh realities of an economic downturn and a seniority system that decides who will stay, and who will go.

"If you wanted a good job, you worked in the mill. Everybody who was anybody worked there," said Tidwell, who grew up in Loyaltan, 59 miles from Quincy in Sierra County.

Around here, mill jobs are coveted. Wages run \$15 to \$22 an hour. There is medical coverage and a 401(k). Some workers drive an hour or more each way, living in such towns as Portola and Greenville.

As the layoffs approached this year, Tidwell, his wife and four young children squeezed into his mother and stepfather's three-bedroom, two-bath home in Loyaltan.

Although Tidwell has about 10 years' experience in sawmills, he's hopped around. The seniority list in Quincy is strictly based on time spent at this plant, not with the company.

Tidwell is out.

A quiet, muscular man with a neat red beard and pierced ears, Tidwell said he honestly doesn't know what he will do. His family likes life in this quiet pocket of the northern Sierra, where they can camp and fish and go crawdad hunting – and feel safe and secure.

"It runs through my mind every day, for sure. It's all I think about," he said. "It's always back there, burning ... Only 12 more work days. Only 11 more work days ... "

Most of the factors were beyond his control.

Coalition's vision unfulfilled

The family-owned Sierra Pacific Industries, the nation's second largest lumber producer, says it has been swept into a downward spiral of negative forces. First, there was the collapse of the housing market and declining demand for construction lumber. But company officials also complain that they have been unable to procure small trees from the U.S. Forest Service, blaming their short supply on a snarl of pending lawsuits by environmentalists over timber harvests on national lands.

"In a sense, it's a one-two punch," said Mark Lathrop, community relations manager for Sierra Pacific.

At a peak in late 2007, the lumber company employed 4,500 in California and Washington state, said Lathrop, a mill employee for 33 years. That has dropped to 3,920 and, after the mill closures in Quincy and later in Camino and Sonora, the ranks will drop to 3,460 – a 23 percent work force reduction in less than two years.

This wasn't the vision.

Lathrop said the small-log mill in Quincy was built in 1996 on the belief that a community coalition known as the Quincy Library Group could successfully forge a plan and persuade Congress to open up the sale of small logs from nearby national forests. And the group did.

The Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act of 1998 was touted by many as a landmark compromise. According to the plan, the thinning of forests would reduce the threat of massive wildfires while supplying the small-log mill with materials.

A decade later, the company contends, lawsuits and appeals by environmental activists have drastically slowed the anticipated flow of timber – helping trigger the layoffs, officials say.

Environmentalists tell a different story.

Doug Bevington of Santa Monica-based Environment Now said Sierra Pacific Industries is "scapegoating" those groups that are trying to ensure that the U.S. Forest Service follows the law. He described the logging company as "the biggest threat to California's forests," and said the legal challenges are aimed at protecting the forests, not making money.

Craig Thomas, executive director of Sierra Forest Legacy, explained that the lawsuits are the result of "the ongoing battle with the Bush administration's logging agenda." Among the goals, he said, are limiting logging in old forests and protection of wildlife species.

Thomas pointed out that the California attorney general's office also joined the legal fighting over the Bush administration logging plans.

Sierra Pacific's mill closures, Thomas says, are a direct casualty of the housing market.

"If there's no demand for homes," he said, "there's going to be no demand for lumber."

Severe blow to economy

Whatever the cause, the layoffs are a blow to workers and to the fragile economy of Plumas County and its unincorporated county seat of Quincy. Multiple generations of local families have worked in the mill, a rite of passage in the town of about 5,000, whose nearest metropolitan area is Reno – 80 miles to the east.

"In a little town like this, it's pretty difficult to overestimate the harm that will come to the community with the loss of these jobs," said John Sheehan, 62, a longtime member of the Quincy Library Group and executive director of the county's nonprofit economic development firm.

Mill employee Amanda Van Huff – one of about 11 women employed at the mill before the layoffs – is clearly exasperated by the legal wrangling that she believes pits "critters" against human beings.

"This company is not raping and pillaging the forest," said Van Huff, 37. "If a tree gets cut down, then the critter can go to the next tree.

"I can't just fly over to the next tree."

Van Huff lives with her disabled husband and 8-year-old daughter in Portola and managed to keep her job – just barely. The 5-foot-10 woman, who enjoys the intense physical rigors of stacking lumber or "pulling chain," squeaked by just above the seniority cut.

Still, it pains her to find herself being trained by someone whose job she'll be taking.

"The hardest part of these layoffs is these guys have become my brothers," she said.

Starting Monday, the operation still will have its large-log mill as well as its biomass electrical generation plant, where Van Huff – who performed well on a mechanical aptitude test – will begin work this week.

There are no guarantees. Workers shifting into new positions are expected to perform well.

Jim Smith, who has been at the mill for 32 years, admitted he was anxious over moving from the debarking control booth in the small-log mill to a similar job in the large-log operation. The technology differs, and he has been coming in during the night shift to prepare.

"I'm still not up to pace," said the 54-year-old worker. "Hopefully, I'll get that way soon."

The ripple effect of the layoffs is keenly felt among the long-time employees. John Goings, 54, a third-generation worker at the Quincy mill, said he routinely comes in an hour or more before his 5 p.m.-to-2 a.m. shift to hang out with fellow workers in the break room.

Armed with a package of Donut Gems, he recently nodded at the 24-year-old identical twins nearby, both of whom are losing their jobs.

"This is one of the few places in Quincy you can get a job and make the amount of money we make," said Goings, who started at the mill at age 18, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.

Current options are slim for the displaced mill employees. A job center in Quincy recently posted openings for a cosmetologist in Susanville, a part-time store clerk in Chester and a part-time piano player at a bowling center.

Despite the economic challenges, Goings said he still takes pride in his work, getting the best quality out of every board that he edges – examining each with a trained, almost artistic eye.

"I'll be here 'til they close the gate," he said. "I told my daughter I knew what the last buffalo hunt felt like."

Sierra Pacific plans to keep the equipment of the small-log mill intact, though there are no plans to reopen. "Maybe we'll have a small miracle," Lathrop said with a sigh.

On Monday, meanwhile, the plant will be open for business – minus 150.

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Call The Bee's Marjie Lundstrom, (916) 321-1055.