

Kemp Seafood plant will leave Duluth, take more than 100 jobs

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"That's why we do economic development," said Mayor Gary Doty in response to news of a plant shutdown in West Duluth. "These things happen."

But he believes the affected workers will be absorbed by other local employers. The landmark Louis Kemp Seafood plant will close by early January, and Doty described it as another case of a decision being made by some out-of-state executive who doesn't know what's available in Duluth.

Kemp employees were informed Wednesday that their jobs will be phased out between October and Jan. 5, 2002, as various production activities are curtailed.

The closing is part of a consolidation that will move all of the company's production to the Louis Kemp Seafood plant in Motley. The Duluth plant employs an estimated 156 workers and provides some temporary jobs. About 50 employees will have an opportunity to take jobs at the plant in Motley.

Plant manager Greg Moore was unavailable for comment, and plant workers were reportedly told not to discuss the closing announcement or a related letter to employees.

The letter was from vice president Mike Robinson, who told them it was a decision by the parent company based on a review of operations.

Doty visited the plant and said he has been in contact with other employers about hiring the displaced workers.

"I feel for the workers," he said Friday. "This is why we work so hard at it."

Louis Kemp Seafood is part of Bumblebee Tuna, which is owned by

ConAgra Foods, the nation's second largest food company behind Kraft. The conglomerate, which also has such brands as Hunts, Wesson and Healthy Choice, reported a drop in profits for the quarter ending in May.

Late Thursday, ConAgra corporate spokesman Diane Kohout confirmed the Duluth plant was closing and production operations were being consolidated to the Motley plant, because it has physical capacity for future expansion. The multi-story West Duluth plant, which dates back to the 1930s, operates three production lines. Located at 3931 W. First St., it sits in a heavily developed area. "The Motley plant has five production lines and 250 employees," she said. "Fifty new jobs will be added." And Duluth employees will have the first opportunity.

According to the history posted on its Web site, the seafood company traces its roots back to 1930 in Duluth when it began as A. Kemp Fisheries. In 1967, Louis Kemp took over as president and expanded the business to Alaska, where the company started processing salmon and herring.

In recent years, it has been owned by Tyson Foods and International Home Foods. In 1999, as the Tyson Seafood plant it had 190 employees. Louis Kemp Seafood became part of ConAgra in 2000. The Duluth plant currently produces imitation crab meat made from Pacific white fish. It has also been a source of dog food for area mushers.

News of the plant closing and job losses came just a day after Doty gave an upbeat speech on the state of the city's economy. He emphasized efforts being made to retain and grow existing businesses, and touted Duluth's low unemployment and population growth.

The same day as the Kemp announcement, the Federal Reserve released its economic activity report on the Ninth District, which includes Minnesota and Wisconsin. It reported that overall manufacturing activity is down -- and especially weak in Minnesota.