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Article published Dec 21, 2006

A sad, familiar story

TREVOR ANDERSON, Staff Writer

Coping with job loss in South Carolina's declining textile industry has almost become a fact of life these days -- a reality magnified once again this week with Tuesday's announcement of a Spartanburg plant shutting down.

"It's a line of work that will be increasingly difficult to keep in the U.S.," said U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C. "There are plenty of people willing to work for less, and it will be very difficult to compete with overseas competition."

Since 1997, nearly 65,000 manufacturing jobs and 83 plants have been lost in South Carolina while overseas outsourcing continues to gain momentum, according to the National Council of Textile Organizations.

On Tuesday, Ameritex Yarn LLC, a commercial yarn producer based in Burlington, N.C., became the latest company to get squeezed as it officially announced the sale of its assets and the closing of its manufacturing facility in Spartanburg.

111 workers in Spartanburg

These closings left 111 workers in Spartanburg and seven employees at the stripped office in Burlington to look for jobs with the holidays only a few days away.

"Whenever you lose that many jobs, it is very painful to the community," Inglis said.

At the company's peak, it had more than 200 employees, but it scaled down its corporate staff over the past year, leaving the Spartanburg work force as the bulk of the company's personnel ranks.

The company moved into its current Spartanburg location when it bought a closed plant from another fabric company in 1998.

"We were saddened and shocked by the news," said Donald Arrowood, director of manufacturing for the Ameritex plant at 655 Old Greenville Highway that produced 50 million

pounds of rotor-spun sales yarn annually. "I feel sorry for all of the associates because it's Christmas and that's never easy."

According to Arrowood, the closing of Ameritex resulted from sudden funding cuts made by the company's bank. He declined to disclose the bank.

He said the workers at the Ameritex plant in Spartanburg were notified quickly and options were laid on the table for transitional health benefits plans through the company.

"As soon as I found out about (the closing), I called government employment agencies and brought in the South Carolina Governor's Rapid Response Team to help all of our employees explore their options," Arrowood said. "We chose to shut down operations immediately in order to make sure that all of our employees were paid."

Several mainstays in South Carolina's textile plants have shut their doors in recent months, including Springs Industries' Fort Lawn bedding plant, employing 700; Westpoint Stevens' Clemson fabricating plant employing 1,345; Piedmont Home Textile's Walhalla plant's 122 workers; National Textiles' Greenwood fabric plant with 390 employees and Delta Woodside Industries' Piedmont spinning and weaving plant, with 361 workers.

While many wonder how the U.S. will be able match the foreign import juggernaut in the future and cut down on the estimated 76,000 U.S. textile jobs lost per year, Inglis said he believes the future of the domestic textile industry lies in technologically advanced fabrics.

"For example, research being done on a fabric that can conduct solar energy and store it in a small battery would greatly reduce the weight of equipment of the average soldier, who carries between 5 and 20 pounds of batteries into battle," he said.

In an interview with the Herald-Journal Wednesday, Inglis said that he believes the American textile industry is not finished. It will just have to reinvent itself and produce fabrics that reflect American ingenuity and forward thinking.

"The U.S. textile industry has gone through a very painful adjustment to deal with competition from overseas," he said. "We need to accept that the rest of the world is going to produce commodities for less, and move towards technological advancement and a higher skilled workforce."

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