

Laid off HibTac workers get recall letters

Hibbing Daily Tribune staff report

HIBBING — One of the two remaining idled mining operations showed signs of coming back online last week.

Recall letters were sent to Hibbing Taconite workers in anticipation of a phased restart of production in April. Work at the mine is expected to start in January.

HibTac, the state's second largest producer of pellets, has been idle since May.

About 135 are currently working at the plant, mostly performing maintenance work, Frank Jenko, president of United Steelworkers Local 2705 told news sources.

That number is expected to double come January. Efforts then will focus on stripping way overburden from the ore deposits at the mine.

Another 50-plus people are anticipated to return in February. The remaining will come back in March.

All 540 union employees will be on the job come the restart of production in April. By the end of that month, all three production lines are scheduled to be running.

Jenko told news sources that union members are happy about being called back to work, however he said they remain bitter about the layoff and its duration.

Maureen Talarico, Cliffs Natural Resources' district manager of public affairs for Minnesota, told news sources that the call back is "good news for the city of Hibbing and good news for the region."

The plant saw two of its production lines shut down in March and another in May, originally for 15 weeks. About 700 employees were put out of work.

Cliffs, which serves as HibTac's managing agent, announced in July that it would keep HibTac shut down until April 2010.

The news came as part of a general update of Cliff's North American iron ore operations as global steel demand remains low and demand for taconite has dropped. At that time, Cliffs had reported that a major steelmaker recently agreed to a price cut of 48 percent for taconite pellets.

The company also stated that it expects to defer about one million tons of purchase obligations for iron ore pellets from customers to the first quarter of 2010, based on amendments to customer supply agreements.

HibTac has a rated capacity of 8 million tons per year, and employs about 700 when operating at full capacity. It is owned by ArcelorMittal (62.3 percent), Cliffs Natural Resources (23 percent) and U.S. Steel Canada (14.7 percent).

Of the six mines in Northeastern Minnesota, HibTac and Keewatin Taconite are currently the only two operations not producing.

Keetac, which is owned by U.S. Steel Corp., shut down last December in response to the global economic recession. It announced at the time that certain facilities would be idled in an attempt to "consolidate operations to safely and more efficiently meet customer demand."

At that time, Keetac employed about 350 hourly and 80 management employees, according to union officials. Its production level was 5.3 million tons.

In September, U.S. Steel officials had told union officials that the plant would recall workers soon. A month later, both union and management representatives announced that the plant would not be restarted and that the shutdown would be prolonged.

No restart date for Keetac has been announced as of yet.

100 percent maple and 100 percent:

On top of the maple cream world



Lisa Rosemore/Herald-Review

Fideldy's maple cream won first place in the North American Syrup Council competition in October, the first time they had entered the maple cream in the international competition. Their TimberSweet syrup placed second in the light amber division. Pictured, displaying their award-winning products and ribbons, from left: Larry Tanner, Troy Fideldy, Amy Fideldy and Ralph Fideldy.

By Lisa Rosemore
Grand Rapids Herald-Review

Ever take first place in an international competition in your very first try?

Fideldy's Maple Cream did just that, taking first place out of 12 entries in the North American Syrup Council competition held during the annual conference — the 50th annual — in October in Bar Harbor, Maine. It was the first time they had entered their maple cream in the competition. As if that weren't enough, a second place ribbon was awarded to the Fideldy's TimberSweet syrup in the light amber category out of 63 entries.

"We finally perfected it," said Amy Fideldy of the maple cream, smiling.

This was the second conference in which Fideldy syrup won an award. In 2007, TimberSweet syrup placed third in the medium amber category.

While Ralph Fideldy and his life-long friend and business partner, Larry Tanner, have been making maple syrup since they were children, the Fideldy Sugar

Bush has only been making maple cream for a couple years. Ralph, Larry, Amy and the Fideldys' son, Troy, explained the basic process for making maple cream.

"It took a while to perfect," said Larry.

The syrup is heated to 232 degrees, no cooler, warned Ralph. It's then placed in a water bath for 12 hours, after which the syrup, which is now the consistency of taffy, is placed in the cream machine where a pump mechanism whips it over and over. How long?

"Until it's done," said Ralph.

Once it's done, the cream is put in jars directly from the machine and refrigerated.

It has to stay refrigerated since it's not canned, explained Ralph. When the cream — which is 100 percent maple syrup, no additives and no dairy products — is finished, it has a creamy consistency. It can be used on breads, pancakes, and Amy said she knew of some who even makes peanut butter sandwiches with it.

The winners aren't announced until the awards banquet at the

conference, said Amy.

Larry, who was unable to attend the conference, said he was confident the maple cream would place, but he didn't expect first place.

Ralph said when their name was called for the maple cream award, he went on stage. The third place award was given, then second place was awarded, and there he stood, still waiting.

When he realized they had taken first place, he remembered thinking, "You gotta be kidding me!"

The crew has no intentions of sitting on their laurels. They tapped approximately 2,200 trees last season and plan on adding more this year to keep up with the growing demand for their syrup and other maple products.

Amy said that they've had numerous requests for their gift boxes.

A good season at the farmer's market five years ago, is now a good month at the farmer's market, said Larry.

Amy added that not only do they sell syrup locally, but they provide syrup to businesses such

as Brewed Awakenings in Grand Rapids and Third Street Bakery in Duluth for use in their products.

"And we want to thank everyone who have patronized us over the years," said Amy. "We do really appreciate it."

They also have a goal for their syrup.

To have the syrup join the maple cream in international first place.



Lisa Rosemore/Herald-Review

This cream machine is used to whip taffy-like maple syrup into maple cream.

SBA proposes new regulations to strengthen the 8(a) Business Development Program for Small Businesses

The U.S. Small Business Administration has announced proposals aimed at strengthening opportunities for disadvantaged small businesses to benefit from its 8(a) Business Development program.

The proposed 8(a) regulation changes are the result of the first comprehensive review of the 8(a) program in a number of years and were published November in the Federal Register. The rules cover a variety of areas of the program, ranging from providing further clarification on determining economic disadvantage to requirements on Joint Ventures and the Mentor-Protégé program. The public comment period on the proposed changes is open for 60 days.

"The 8(a) program has a proven record as an effective program for helping disadvantaged small businesses gain access to training and contracting opportunities to help them grow, create jobs and ultimately succeed in the marketplace once they graduate from the program," SBA Administrator Karen Mills said. "These proposed changes build on that foundation of success, and will strengthen the program and maximize its benefits for eligible small businesses."

The 8(a) program is a nine-year business development program for small businesses that fit the SBA's criteria of being socially and economically disadvantaged. The 8(a) program helps these firms develop their business and provides them with access to government contracting opportunities, allowing them to become solid competitors in the federal marketplace. It also provides specialized business training, counseling, marketing assistance and high-level executive development to its participants. In FY08, small businesses received \$16.1 billion in 8(a) contracts.

Some of the components of the 8(a) program that the proposed changes will affect include:

- Joint ventures: Qualifying that 8(a) firms are required to perform a significant portion of the work to ensure that these companies are able to build capacity;
- Economic disadvantage: Providing more clarification on economic disadvantage as it relates to total assets, gross income, retirement accounts and a spouse of an 8(a) company owner in determining the owner's access to capital and credit;
- Mentor-Protégé program: Requiring that

assistance provided through the Mentor-Protégé relationship is directly tied to the protégé firm's business plan;

- Ownership and control requirements: providing flexibility in admitting individuals of immediate family members of current and former 8(a) participants;
- Tribally-owned firms: Seeking public comments on the best way to determine whether a tribe meets the criteria of being economically disadvantaged for the 8(a) program;
- Excessive withdrawals: Amending regulations on what is considered excessive as a basis for termination or early graduation from the 8(a) program; and
- Business size for primary industry: Requiring that a firm's size status remain small for its primary industry code during its participation in the 8(a) program.

Small businesses may submit comments to this proposed rule on or before Dec. 28, 2009, to www.regulations.gov where they will be posted or mail them to 409 3rd St. SW, Mail Code: 6610, Washington, D.C. 20416 or via e-mail at: 8aBD2@sba.gov.