

Record drought claims more victims

By Peter Lamb

SUNBEAM Foods has announced 30 jobs will be lost in a restructure of its Irymple dried fruit operation due to the drought.

Sunbeam chief operating officer Richard Findlay said yesterday the drought had "significantly reduced the amount of local fruit" for processing.

The changes were necessary to protect the jobs of the majority of the company's Irymple workforce.

"Sunbeam is calling for volunteers for redundancy payouts, and in addition will be providing support and assistance to employees affected," Mr Findlay said.

"Sunbeam remains committed to its Irymple operations.

"However, the company has been left with no alternative but to make changes to its operations in light of the continuing drought."

In mid November, another regional major, Hardy Wine Company's Stanley Winery at Buronga also announced it was shedding about 70 staff.

That was part of Hardy's "consolidation" that would see packaging and winemaking relocated to Berri in SA by May.

The company will also be shipping red grapes direct to SA this vintage, but will continue to crush white varieties at Buronga.

Staff at the Stanley complex would shrink to 15, the company said at the time.

Yesterday, Mr Findlay said the redundancies at Sunbeam were not immediate but would occur over time.

Support and assistance would be given to the staff who took packages.

"We're talking this through with our people today," Mr Findlay said.

The company has about 400 staff at its sites in Mildura, Renmark, Loxton and in its Angas Park business in Sunraysia and Angaston.

"This harvest, we just won't have enough fruit to put through our processing area," Mr Findlay said.

"The jobs won't disappear until about April."

Mr Findlay said he thought the 2008, dried vine fruit crop could be down 40 per cent on last harvest.

The company's intake last year was about 15,000 tonnes by industry estimates.

"The crop we're expecting will take out one of our processing shifts.

"We're trying to preserve as many positions as we can, and we're looking at retraining.

"But the reality is that we'll have less product on our processing line and we need fewer people."

Member for Mildura Peter Crisp said it was essential those made redundant at Sunbeam and not of retirement age, had the opportunity to retrain.

"I welcome the on-going commitment by Sunbeam to Sunraysia in these difficult times," Mr Crisp said.

"I'll be calling on Skills and Workforce Participation Minister Jacinta Allan to ensure there are sufficient resources to re-skill these displaced people so they can gain employment elsewhere in the community.

"This is a challenge for the recently launched Skills Store, which opens later this month."

Mr Crisp also wants to see the federal Exceptional Circumstances \$10,000 drought re-training package extended beyond the farm gate to food process workers such as those who leave Sunbeam.

Australian Dried Fruits Association chairman Peter Jones said he was expecting the staff cuts at Sunbeam.

"I'm surprised Sunbeam held off reducing staff for as long as they did.

"You have to be realistic about reducing costs and remaining viable."

Mr Jones said the "knock-on" effect to other regional businesses from the drought could see more jobs go.

Mr Jones said the dried vine fruit crops estimates were ranging from 10,000 tonnes to about 13,000 tonnes this harvest, down from about 19,000 tonnes last harvest.