

# Gerber To Upgrade Ark. Facility, Hire 50 Workers

Chuck Bartels, AP Business Writer

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — A Gerber baby food plant in Fort Smith will get a \$90 million upgrade and hire 50 more workers to operate a new infant cereal line, parent company Nestle Nutrition North America announced Tuesday.

The plant already employs 650 people and plays an important role in the economy of the city of 84,000.

Fort Smith has endured large layoffs from some of its biggest manufacturers over the past several years, including a Whirlpool Corp. factory that shed about 3,600 jobs when it moved part of its refrigerator operation to Mexico. The Whirlpool layoff rippled through the community, resulting in supplier businesses closing or cutting jobs.

But things have been looking up lately in Fort Smith, where manufacturing is the core of its economy.

Layoffs appear to have bottomed out. Key employers, including Whirlpool, Rheem Manufacturing Co., Baldor Electric and others have kept their doors open through the recession, and now the economy is showing signs of picking up.

Besides adding the new cereal line, Gerber plans to make upgrades aimed at increasing production capacity in its current lines. Products manufactured there now include meat sticks and pureed baby food in plastic and glass containers.

Employees don't have to worry about being idle while the plant gets its facelift.

"The work is definitely continuing during construction," Nestle Nutrition spokeswoman Emily Kornis said Tuesday.

Companies have been known to close plants as old as the Gerber facility and shift operations to a newer plant.

"I think the initial design of the facility was sound enough and we've maintained the equipment to the point we've been able to continue operating," Kornis said.

Another major project on the horizon for Fort Smith is a \$100 million wind turbine plant announced by Mitsubishi Power Systems Americas that carries the promise of 400 jobs. But construction is on hold because of litigation between Mitsubishi and General Electric Co. GE accused Mitsubishi of patent infringement, and Mitsubishi filed its own suit, accusing GE of trying to monopolize the market.

Other employers have sought out the Fort Smith area, including Houston-based Oxane Materials Inc., which makes materials to fracture rock in natural gas drilling.

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Oxane is spending \$15 million on a plant in Van Buren, with plans to hire 50 workers. The company says it could employ up to 300 people by 2014.

Last year, Mars Petcare opened an \$80 million plant with projected employment of 200.

The developments have led Gov. Mike Beebe to say the Fort Smith area economy is outgrowing its troubles.

"This expansion by Gerber illustrates the continued revival and growth of manufacturing in Fort Smith. It is the continued success of respected companies like Nestle that will show other prospective businesses the benefits of locating in Sebastian County," Beebe said in a prepared statement.

Work at the Gerber plant is to be finished by September 2012.

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