

Wrangler To Rebuild Plant After Tornado

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Bob Johnson, Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The largest employer in the small, northwest Alabama town of Hackleburg announced Monday night that it plans to rebuild a Wrangler plant wiped out by a massive April tornado, prompting cheers and celebration among workers and townsfolk.

VF Corp. officials delivered the news that they would rebuild the distribution center destroyed by the April 27 storm that killed 18 people in Hackleburg in Marion County. It was one of several tornadoes that wreaked havoc across Alabama that day and also wiped out most of the town's businesses.

"It's Christmas in August," Marion County Commission President Don Barnwell said Monday afternoon after receiving word. Barnwell had said previously that he didn't know if the town could survive without the Wrangler plant, which had employed 150 people in the town of 1,500.

VF Chairman and CEO Eric Wiseman said the new plant would be rebuilt on the site of the old plant on U.S. 43. He said the new plant would be larger and would employ about 200 people. He said Hackleburg had remained the company's "leading option" for a new plant site. Some Wrangler employees had been working in recent weeks at the company's plant in Holly Pond. Wiseman said the company plans to close that plant when the larger plant opens in Hackleburg.

Wrangler officials delivered the news first to Wrangler employees and then called local and state officials.

"This is a great day for the people of Hackleburg and the state of Alabama," said Gov. Robert Bentley. "Today's news that Wrangler will rebuild in our state could not have come at a better time as communities across Alabama are rebuilding their lives."

Bentley earlier had said rebuilding the Wrangler plant was critical to the future of Hackleburg, which was named Best Hometown in America in 2007 by CMT, the country music network. Bentley said the state offered generous incentives to get Wrangler to stay, but did not give out the details of the package. Barnwell said the Marion County Commission offered the company \$200,000 to remain in Hackleburg.

Barnwell said the employees began cheering and shouting after learning of the plan. They got word at a meeting in an old, separate Wrangler facility that was not badly damaged by the storm.

Republican state Rep. Mike Millican of Hamilton, whose district includes Hackleburg, said he was called by company officials at about 6:30 p.m. and told Wrangler was staying in Hackleburg.

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"It would have been devastating if Wrangler didn't stay. I don't know how the town could have survived," Millican said.

With Wrangler coming back, Millican said he hopes the town's only grocery store, Piggly Wiggly, will also soon be able to reopen.

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