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Buck Knives is moving on to Idaho; costs cited

By Matthew T. Hall
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January 15, 2003

EL CAJON – Buck Knives, one of the county's landmark businesses, said yesterday that it is leaving California and will move to Idaho early next year.

President and CEO C.J. Buck said California's rising cost of business forced the hand of the family, which has run the company for 100 years. He said that in April, too, when first discussing a possible move.

Buck said no more than a quarter of his 250 employees will move to the plant in Post Falls, Idaho. He said no layoffs will come this year, and added the company has not set a moving date beyond the first quarter of 2004.

Last year, Buck Knives celebrated its century mark. It was founded in Kansas in 1902, moved to San Diego after World War II and settled in El Cajon in 1968. Its knives are sold internationally and are favorites among outdoorsmen.

Buck, who was 8 when the company moved to El Cajon, said his father, Chuck Buck, made the final decision to leave the city late last week.

C.J. Buck credited local politicians and business leaders with working hard to retain the company in the spring, but said that after November's statewide elections the family didn't envision the business climate getting better in California.

East County Supervisor Diane Jacob said the problems faced by the company are "breaking the backs of businesses in this state."

"I think this is just the beginning of the exodus of businesses in the state unless there are sweeping reforms in the way we treat businesses," Jacob said.

Terry Saverson, head of the East County Regional Chamber of Commerce, said the departure of Buck Knives illustrates all businesses are having trouble with state laws and regulations. She said she knows



of several businesses that are feeling pressure to leave.

El Cajon Mayor Mark Lewis said he hoped the departure would not create a domino effect, noting that some local businesses are suppliers to Buck Knives.

The company has struggled over the years, facing increased competition in an international market. Annual sales are off 25 percent since 1995. Twenty years ago, the company had 600 employees, more than twice what it has now.

The 10 acres the company owns near Gillespie Field went up for sale again yesterday at an asking price of \$9 million. It was on the market last year, but the family took it off when no one made an offer.

Phil Duckett, the company's vice president of operations, said its new 12-acre home cost about \$800,000.

The land price is but one of the incentives that Idaho offered Buck Knives. The company will receive \$3,000 per employee from the state for training. In addition, wages, benefits, utilities and workers' compensation costs are much lower than California's, Duckett said.

In Idaho, the company's energy costs could fall 60 percent, workers' compensation costs 40 percent, and wages and benefits 20 percent, compared with here. Executives said they expect to employ the same number of people.

Duckett said the company's annual savings would be in the millions of dollars, but he declined to be more specific.

The company chose Idaho over states, such as Washington and Oregon, because it had the "best long-term, business-friendly legislative environment," Buck said.

He said the news disappointed but did not surprise workers. Buck told them yesterday to give them as much time as possible to find other jobs if they wanted to start looking.

"We ran the risk of giving too much notice and possibly losing people while we still needed them," he said. "That's a chance we decided to take."

The company is considering bonuses and incentives for workers who decide to stay to the end, Buck said.

He summed up his thoughts on the move, saying: "I adore East County, so it's very sad to have to make this decision that we have to relocate. On the other hand, Idaho is beautiful."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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