

Trade policy could lead to more plant closings

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Finding a domestic tagline on merchandise is almost as hard to find as a diamond in the rough. With more and more textile and apparel industries racing overseas, the gem may soon even be extinct, possibly leaving some middle-class families to vie for lower-class jobs.

Officials say that while WestPoint Home in Abbeville and Second Chance Body Armor in Geneva still survive, the plants could face the same hardships forcing Phillips Van Heusen, a 60-year-old textile plant operation in Ozark, to shut its doors permanently by May 15.

Jodie Ayres, interim spokesperson for WestPoint Home, formerly known as WestPoint Stevens, said the company filed for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy in June 2003. Although still hiring, she said it's not certain how long the 966 workers will be employed.

"It's hard to say because right now there is virtually no apparel industry left in the U.S.," she said. "Low cost wages in Pakistan, India and China could lead the global market entirely overseas."

Ayres said the bed and bath product plant is the only domestic apparel company owned by a U.S. entity.

But James Mixon, production manager and engineer for Second Chance Body Armor, one of the top four employers in Geneva, said the protective vest company is facing a bright future. "We have a big customer base with police and government work," he said. "I believe we're on solid ground."

Quotas created to limit imported textile items expired Jan. 1, 2005. This means domestic plants already struggling to compete with other plants in the United States would have to either cut back on their production or workforce. For many companies, cutbacks resulted in total elimination.

Alan Tonelson, research fellow for the U.S. Business and Industry Council, said the nation's current trade policies could leave the country in grim circumstances within five to 10 years. The "one-way" policy is not formed to boost exports and create more job opportunities and wages for U.S. workers, he said, but instead to make it easier - and cheaper - for companies to thrive overseas.

"Our trade policy has been encouraging the process of trading high wage jobs for low wage jobs with fewer benefits," Tonelson said.

"I don't think anybody in any business would be well advised to sit back and hope for a miracle."

Concerning Second Chance, Tonelson said experiments with materials used for body armor are being combined with technology to make the industry more attractive. From clothes that maintain their temperature to other technological experiments, he said the view of the textile industry as old fashioned could change.

"One of my greatest fears is our political system will not change the policy until it is too late," he said. "But I am optimistic."

If a plant like WestPoint Home was to close down, Ayres said severance packages would be provided under the Worker Adjustment Retraining Notification Act that was enacted in 1988.