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End of an era: Pinova plant to close permanently

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A few months after a fire caused significant damage, Pinova announced Wednesday it was shutting down its Brunswick plant.

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Steam and smoke will no longer pump out of the industrial operation that greets motorists at the mainland entrance to the F.J. Torras Causeway.

Pinova Solutions is closing its doors permanently, a statement from the company said Wednesday.

The facility, which has operated for more than 110 years in Brunswick, will not reopen in the aftermath of a massive April 15 fire at the wood rosin plant that destroyed core production assets and infrastructure, a statement from the company said. Opening the facility again would require “substantial demolition, reconstruction, costs and time,” the statement said.



“This is a difficult decision, considering all our talented employees and the long history of the site in Brunswick, but one made after careful review,” Ron Kurtz, director of operations at Pinova, said in the statement. “We are committed to treating employees with respect and fairness and to close the site in line with our values. Pinova appreciates the value that employees have brought to the company.”

The plant ceased operations after the fire and has not operated fully since.

Employees were notified of the closing Wednesday morning. Layoffs will occur in phases as the plant is decommissioned and closed according to regulatory standards, the statement said.

“Wind down activities, including emptying tanks and disassembling equipment, will begin soon, although full shutdown is expected to take 18 months,” the statement said.

The Golden Isles Development Authority’s most recent count of employees at Pinova shows 220 people work at the plant. There are likely more than double that number of jobs indirectly connected to the plant, according to a multiplier used by economic developers.

“Pinova is committed to supporting those employees, in line with the company’s values, and will provide severance, career counseling and support transitioning to future employment,” the statement said. “Pinova is committed to working with its valued clients to look for internal and other alternatives, as available.”

Ryan Moore, president and CEO of the Golden Isles Development Authority, said authority staff is meeting with company officials and a state task force that oversees large-scale closings and layoffs to ensure employees can access opportunities for new jobs.

“We are focused at this time on the employees who are now looking for jobs,” Moore said. “We are making sure that we as a community are coordinated to give them as many opportunities as possible.”

Pinova qualifies under the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, WARN, which requires employers with more than 100 employees who are laying off at least 50 people to provide at least 60 days’ notice with pay before they are out of a job.

Employees will be on paid leave until July 10 and employed through Sept. 15, company officials said.

Pinova officials said Wednesday that some employees will continue working with the company during the 18 months the plant is shutting down. That number has not been determined.

Employees can also apply for positions at DRT America, Pinova’s parent company, which operates a facility in Rincon, officials said. A list of job opportunities with the company was provided to employees.

The severance package has been presented to non-union employees and will be negotiated in good faith with the union, the company said.

REACTIONS FROM OFFICIALS

Brunswick Mayor Cosby Johnson said his administration’s immediate focus is on Pinova’s employees.

“We are working with larger businesses in the area as well as major job centers to ensure we are providing a robust municipal response for any individual who lost their job as a result of the economic decision of Pinova,” Johnson said. “The employees’ skills and determination has defined a generation of hard workers in Brunswick and throughout our region.”

City Commissioner Johnny Cason, who represents the city’s north ward where Pinova is located, said the closing is a major blow to the city in terms of employment and economic development.

“It’s sure a shot across the bow to this community,” Cason said. “If we don’t have something called manufacturing, it’s not a good, positive thing for this community.”

Brunswick was home to many industrial businesses in the not-to-distant past that paid well and supported local families, he said. Most are now closed, he noted.

“I know what the loss of a job is. It’s absolutely devastating,” Cason said.

Glynn County Commissioner Allen Booker, whose district includes most of the city, said he was “taken aback” by the seemingly sudden decision.

“Neighbors come together and find ways to solve problems, and this is not a solution,” Booker said. “This is not what is best for anyone.”

Glynn County Commission Chairman Wayne Neal said he learned about the plant closure Wednesday morning when he received a phone call from a Pinova lawyer.

Before the announcement, Neal said he was “fearful” the plant would never reopen after the fire.

“It’s a loss to our county,” he said. “We hate it.”

Neal said county officials plan to do everything possible to help the displaced workers.

At-large County Commissioner Walter Rafolski said he was surprised to hear about the closing.



“I think it’s a big loss to the county,” he said. “I was stunned when I learned about it.”

He now wonders what the future holds for the 152-acre site.

U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, the Pooler Republican whose district includes Georgia’s coastal counties, lamented the loss.

“I’m sad to hear that the Pinova plant in Brunswick, a longstanding community partner, is closing its doors,” Carter said. “Companies like these are the bedrock of our local economy, employing hundreds of our friends and neighbors, and all of Glynn County will feel this loss.”

“I’d also like to reiterate my gratitude for the first responders who quickly contained the fire earlier this year and protected their community from further irreparable damage.”

THE FIRE

Johnson and Booker have both expressed frustration with the pace at which answers about the fire are emerging. No report so far has been released about the cause of the fire by company-hired investigators, the State Fire Marshall’s Office or federal officials.

The company’s headquarters are in France, Booker noted, making it hard to communicate directly with leadership. Local representatives are responsive, but he said local authorities have long wanted to open direct lines of communication with Pinova.

“I know they were having an inspection, but we still don’t know the cause of the fire or if that’s the reason why they’re deciding to close,” Booker said.

Johnson said that moving forward he will look closely at what state and federal agencies will conclude in their reports on the fire.

“Their insight will help lead further action by my administration,” Johnson said.

Two fires occurred April 15 at the plant. The first ignited early in the morning and was quickly put down by the Brunswick Fire Department.

The fire ignited again around 2 p.m. and burned for more than six hours, sending a thick black plume of smoke into the air that blew across the marshes and over St. Simons Island. The Brunswick Fire Department was aided in the firefight by the Glynn County and Jekyll Island fire departments as well as multiple other agencies from around the region. A firefighting foam was deployed on the ground and by air that eventually extinguished the blaze at around 10 p.m. that night.

The fire prompted shelter-in-place orders for areas surrounding the facility and on St. Simons Island where the smoke blew. An evacuation order was also ordered that evening for the area around the plant.

Plant officials said at a town hall meeting in the weeks following the fire that the alpha-pinene that burned is a byproduct of the wood-pulping process. Alpha-pinene is highly flammable and has a low flashpoint of 91 degrees, according to the National Library of Medicine’s National Center for Biotechnology Information.

Brunswick Fire Chief Tim White said Wednesday that the department continues to monitor the site of the fire and is still working with the State Fire Marshal’s Office to investigate its cause.

HISTORY, FUTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The closing leaves an uncertain future for the 152-acre facility. Moore said that after first working with employees through the transition, the development authority and its community partners will begin looking at what happens with the property as it shuts down over the next 18 months.

There are currently no clear plans for what comes next.

“It will be a much larger conversation about the future of the property,” Moore said.

The facility opened in 1911 as a naval stores plant that used a then-new method for extracting rosin from pine tree stumps. Nine years later, in 1920, Hercules began operating at the facility producing rosin and turpentine from pine stumps.

Hercules operated the facility for nearly 100 years, producing numerous different products over the decades that included smokeless powder during World War I, munitions during World War II, and later an insecticide called toxaphene, among other things.

Production of toxaphene and other substances left an environmental legacy that is still being remediated today.

Mayor Johnson said environmental mitigation at the site must be the focus of Pinova, its parent company and regulatory agencies.

“Knowing that this is a lengthy process, it is important to prepare our city to ensure that proper environmental study is done on the footprint so that we can properly assess the impact to our people and ecosystem,” he said.

Environmental cleanup efforts at the Terry Creek outfall ditch, which is across U.S. 17 from the facility, will continue under the supervision of the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Cleanup efforts there are to eliminate exposure to remaining levels of residual toxaphene in the surrounding marsh and creeks.

Environmental remediation of Hercules’ legacy will also continue at the Pinova site under the supervision of the state Environmental Protection Division. Hercules and Pinova are listed as co-permittees with the state on the corrective action plan that seeks to remediate chromium in the soil and groundwater.

Pinova purchased the operational portions of the facility from Hercules in 2010. Pinova produced a terpene resin from pine stumps that are used in numerous applications, including fragrances and food products like chewing gum, sports drinks and makeup. It also is used in tapes and road-paving materials, according to the

company's website.

Pinova is owned by DRT America, a U.S. subsidiary of French-based DRT. DRT is owned by Fermentich International SA, a Switzerland-based company that specializes in fragrances and flavors.

Taylor Cooper and Gordon Jackson contributed to this report.



Michael Hall