**Spring Hope plant to begin layoffs**

Associates at Belt Concepts of America, a lightweight conveyor belt manufacturing plant in Spring Hope, are feeling the sting of the economy after learning that two employees will be let go on Friday in what appears to be the first wave of layoffs. Ed Haines, plant manager, says the state of the economy dictates we cannot operate under current conditions.

“The bottom line is money,” says union representative, Jeannette Richardson. Mrs. Richardson, 56, a quality control inspector from Rocky Mount, has worked for Belt Concepts for 7 years. She says new leadership needs to be introduced and a “management overhaul” will be the only viable long term solution. She says the negativity surrounding the current layoffs will have a lasting impact on future operations.

Belt Concepts of America, formerly owned by Goodyear, currently owned by the Carlisle Group, operated by Veyance Technology, manufacturers hundreds of different conveyor belts for a wide range of industries. Shipping companies, treadmill manufacturers, major grocery stores, food and package industries, as well as the agriculture and farming community all use conveyor belts made at Spring Hope.

About a month ago, workers were informed that if business did not pick up by May, then there would be a wave of layoffs. “Right-Sizing” was the word used as the title of the presentation given to employees, which to them meant simply “layoffs.”

Belt Concepts includes 4 main departments: belting-the machines where the actual conveyor belt is produced, weaving and mixing-where fabric and paste are manufactured to bring to belting to use, and shipping-where the importing of materials and exporting of goods occurs.

The decision to eliminate weaving entirely was made first according to management and human resources. This decision was made because they say it would be cheaper and more efficient importing fabric into the plant rather than making it “in house.” The weaving department consisted of 5 employees. The two members laid off this week come from the shipping department and include a shipping supervisor.

The economic downturn has caused major cutbacks in orders received and how they are processed. Team leader, 1st shift belting supervisor, Richard Brazzell, 66, says “my chances of surviving the next layoffs are as severe as anyone else.” Mr. Brazzell cites poor management whom without a contingency plan were unable to make important decisions during initial stages of a bad economy. He continues by saying his wife’s ailing health and medical bills are the only thing preventing him from retiring.

“The uncertainty of work has a negative impact on working conditions,” says Dalton Evans, 57, material handler of 7 years at Belt Concepts. Mr. Evans repeated a common theme that many of the employees have concerning the layoffs; poor management is just as much to blame as the bad economy.

Carl Knight, 42, machine assistant of 4 years says that he doesn’t care whether he is laid off from work or not. Frustrated he exclaims, “I’m tired of the same old drama!”

In 2010 Belt Concepts of America proudly celebrated their 25th anniversary.