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Cargill Salt plans to shut down Redwood City plant

By Allison Louie, STAFF WRITER
Inside Bay Area

REDWOOD CITY — The salt industry, which has been a part of the Redwood City business scene for more than 100 years, will be phased out, as Cargill Salt has announced plans to wind down operations at its local plant during the next few years.

Cargill, along with its real estate development partner DMB Associates, Inc., mailed a letter to every Redwood City household Tuesday inviting the occupants to participate in the development process and asking for ideas on ways to use the 1,433 acres.

"We want the residents of Redwood City to tell us their hopes and aspirations for the future use of the property," said DMB spokesperson John Bruno.

Cargill decided more than six years ago to concentrate on producing higher-end salt from its Newark location. Since that plant has a refinery, salt suitable for eating as well as pharmaceutical uses can be produced.

The operations in Redwood City do not have refinery capabilities, and the plant can only produce unprocessed industrial salts that are used for roadways and shipped off on barges.

Three years ago, Cargill sold 16,500 acres, an area the size of Manhattan, to the federal and state governments in what was known as the largest wetlands restoration project ever, according to Cargill Public Affairs Manager Lori Johnson.

"Times change," Johnson said. "We've been proud to be part of the business community in Redwood City, and it's important for us to move forward."

Johnson noted a former salt plant on the East Bay is now a W Hotel and an office complex.

Salt harvesting has a long history in the Bay Area, tracing back to the Ohlone Indians, who would gather the salt that would naturally crystallize at the edge of the Bay. But it wasn't produced commercially until 1854, when it was sold for \$50 per ton to 49ers, a price more expensive than gold itself.

The Leslie Salt Company diked off pond areas in Redwood City for salt harvesting in the 1920s, and it was bought by Cargill, a Minneapolis-based commodities company, in the late 1970s.

"The area has been a salt operation since as long as I can remember," said Councilman Jim Hartnett, who grew up in Redwood City. "It's important for the community to be involved; any change would have to be approached with caution."

The letter sent from Cargill Salt informed Redwood City residents that there will be various opportunities in the coming months to voice suggestions about the fate of the saltworks site, and that open houses and workshops are planned for the community.

"This is a good step that Cargill is taking," said Mayor Barbara Pierce. "We'll take it a day at a time and give the community the opportunity to get involved and voice their opinions."