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Glass Companies Cope with Energy Prices

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Many of West Virginia's glassmakers are facing shutdowns and layoffs because of the high price of natural gas.

Story by Cathy Bonnstetter

Recently, Judel Glass, a major employer in the tiny hamlet of Salem, announced most of its workforce no longer had jobs. About 60 former Judel workers are without employment, according to a former employee. Judel cited the rising cost of energy as the culprit.

The hand-blown glass industry across the state is feeling the energy crunch as factories struggle to stay in the marketplace.

"We estimate that we will have paid 40 percent more for gas by the end of the year than we had budgeted," said Tom Fenton, plant manager and vice president of Fenton Art Glass Co. in Williamstown. "We had already budgeted a hefty increase."

Fenton Glass employs 300 to 400 people.

"We lay off and hire on the edges as we go through the year," Fenton said. "For the past several months, we've actually been hiring. Right now, we're hiring blowers, decorators and artists."

Davis and Lynch, a Star City hand-blown glass operation since 1944, employs 65 to 70 people. They make hand-blown glass lampshades, globes and gift items.

"Natural gas is a large portion of our cost," said Charlene Geiger, office manager. "We run the furnaces five days a week. Due to the increase in natural gas, we shut down one crystal tank for a few weeks in October."






However, Davis and Lynch plans to stay the course without layoffs.

"We struggle every day," Geiger said. "But we continue to move forward."

Fenton said his plant's location, right off the interstate, is a big boost to sales with tourist trade. Blenko Glass in Milton also is strategically located.

Owner William H. Blenko Jr. said 81 percent of the people who

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visit the factory are from out of state.

Blenko Glass employs 60 people and has two divisions -- stained glass and fancy glassware.

Blenko is the third generation to own the company, which has been passed to the fourth generation.

His great-uncle relocated the business to Milton in 1921 because of the availability of gas.

Like Fenton, Blenko Glass has weathered economic storms. Blenko finds this one particularly frustrating.

"Gas is all over this state. Put a stick in the ground, and you get gas. I think our help lies with the Public Service Commission," he said. "We've had to deal with this quick escalation of prices. We've instituted various means of gas economy, and we've had to downsize. We're just doing the best we can."

Glass plants are not alone in their struggle. They have Industries of the Future-West Virginia (IOF-WV), an entity that works to help save energy at the state's energy-intensive operations.

However, IOF can do only so much.

"With energy efficiency measures, you can probably look at a 15 percent reduction of energy cost," IOF-WV Director Carl Irwin said. "If you're really good, maybe 20 percent if you implement everything you possibly can. But what are you going to do if the price of natural gas is doubled?"

You try to hang on.

"It is hard to avoid using a lot of energy, but we're trying to use it well," Fenton said. "I'm hoping coal gasification comes along fast enough so that it could help us."

Davis and Lynch uses energy-saving recuperators to keep the heat contained and to reduce gas usage.

Blenko, Davis and Lynch and Fenton are among the last hand-blown glass strongholds in the state.

"We have the fuel, the people and the limestone," Blenko said. "There used to be nearly 100 factories in this state, but one by one they've fallen off the vine."

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