Pyrotechnics plant to be dismantled

By CHUCK MUELLER
Sun Staff Writer

BARSTOW — A pyrotechnics production plant, opened last year to supply smoke devices for maneuvers at Fort Irwin, will be dismantled because the Army's need for the training simulators has been filled, a company partner said.

However, the plant's pre-fabricated buildings may be relocated if the company wins a new contract to produce explosives, Jim Bray, a partner at the Mojave River Pyrotechnics Corp., said.

"We plan to start dismantling the buildings within a week or two," Bray said Thursday, "and will store buildings, parts and chemicals on a 20-acre site in north Barstow."

Under a $2 million contract with the Army, Mojave River Pyrotechnics Corp. shipped about $50,000 in training simulation devices weekly to Fort Irwin until December, Bray said.

"The Army told us it had a year's supply (of smoke devices) as of the end of November," he said. "As it was authorized to hold only six month's worth, the Army won't need any more until May or June."

The company laid off its 50 employees in November when it closed its production plant at 36131 Yucca Ave., Bray said, and now is waiting for a new order from the Army.

"We'll use the time to build a new plant elsewhere," he said, "but we've made no decision on its location."

The company's present 2½-acre site — containing five assembly buildings, two trailers and a

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Pyrotechnics

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esting area — is too con-
ined, Bray said.

"The plant was not
built in conformance
with the county building
code," he said, "because
of spacing of buildings
and foundations.

"And federal safety in-
spectors said the build-
ings weren't far apart
enough.

"But it would cost seve-
ral thousand dollars to
bring the plant into con-
formity with county and
federal regulations,"
Bray said. "It will be
cheaper to tear every-
thing down and rebuild
the plant."

Bray and partner H.W.
Bishop, who runs a whole-
sale chemical business in
Phelan, are looking for a
new plant site in the Bar-
stow area.

"We may rebuild with-
in two months, but
there's no rush as the
Army is overstocked
with training simula-
tors)." Bray said. "We'd
take another look at our
plans if the Army were to
come back next week. We
might even stay at our
present plant."

Bray said Mojave River Pyrotechnics may have to bid again for an Army contract.

The firm was the lowest of six bidders for the original 1982 military contract, set aside for small businesses. The local company underbid a Texas company by about $500,000, Bray said, gaining a major advantage through lower transportation costs to the fort.

If production operations resume, employees who were laid off last fall will be called back first, Bray said.

The company grossed up to $45,000 weekly last year, and had a payroll of $6,000 to $7,000 per week.

The firm assembled four types of explosive packages that blast and belch smoke and flames when triggered at the fort's extensive mock warfare range northeast of Barstow.

Bray, a chemistry professor at Barstow College, said the armed forces turned to simulators for training programs because of a tightened defense budget.

Mojave River Pyrotechnics assembled four devices: a training device that simulated a steel shell hitting a steel target, such as an Army tank; a "hit-kill" indicator that belched out black smoke; a device simulating tank cannon fire, and a fourth explosive that spurted fire for 15 seconds and created a smoke screen.

During full production, the plant shipped about 10,000 units to Fort Irwin weekly.

Bray said the company, through an agreement with Kerr-McGee Corp., is acquiring 25 tons of "potassium perchlorate," an oxidizer used in making flash powder and other explosives.

"We're getting it free, and now all we need is a contract to put it into use," he said.

Bray said Kerr-McKee no longer is producing the compound commercially at its Henderson, Nev., operations.

"They had a lot of sludge, not fully processed, that had to be disposed of at a hazardous waste site," he said. "As that would have cost several thousand dollars, and Kerr-McGee did not want to pay for its disposal, we've taken it at no cost."