

Open for business

There has been much excitement about investment at the Oceana fish meal plant...

YOLANDE DU PREEZ

The news that the Oceana fish meal factory will remain open has been met with great excitement by employees and residents of Hangberg.

The announcement was made by Oceana CEO Francois Kuttel at the Sentinel Primary school on Wednesday November 4 during a briefing.

Mr Kuttel said the company had committed to turning the business around and, in the months to follow, it would invest R11 million in the plant to regain profitability.

But that was not the only good news. He said the Department of Public Works had agreed to extend the factory's lease for five years and had confirmed its atmospheric licence with local government.

Previously, the factory operated



PICTURE: YOLANDE DU PREEZ

■ The Oceana fish meal factory in Hout Bay. Owners will invest millions in the next few months to regain profitability.

on a month-to-month lease.

In August the company announced its plans to close the factory and relocate its employees to the group's St Helena Bay facility.

This was because production had run at a R20million loss year on year for the past three years after the factory halved its production days to reduce smelly emissions from the plant.

"You cannot run a plant at 40 percent of its capacity and make money, said Mr Kuttel.

"Hout Bay is the most expensive place in South Africa to make fish meal due to the regulatory environ-

ment we operate in."

The decision to close the factory was blamed on complaints by a group, Fresh Air for Hout Bay, which had demanded the City of Cape Town address the emissions from the boiler chimneys ("Sing the stink blues," Sentinel News, May 8).

Following the announcement in August, residents and workers vowed to fight for the factory to stay open.

Mr Kuttel said retrenchment had never been an option and all employees had been guaranteed employment, as long as they were willing to relocate to one of the company's other plants. It would have cost the company R80 million to move out of Hout Bay.

This resulted in a Section 189 consultation process between Oceana and its employees after workers said they were unwilling to relocate to St Helena Bay.

"We worked with the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), national government and local government to secure the future of the facility and its employees," he said.

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R2m to help tackle plant's fishy odour

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Mr Kuttel said they had been overwhelmed by support from the community, the Peace and Mediation Forum, the Hout Bay Civic Association and the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) who had all made it clear that they wanted the factory to stay.

Mr Kuttel said the Section 189 process was now officially over, and the company had signed an agreement with its employees, facilitated by the CCMA.

Referring to the timing of the decision to withdraw from the valley, Mr Kuttel said: "We were not in control of our destiny, and did not know if we were welcome here from a National Government point of view, and we knew some of the community did not want us here.

"We now know that we are wanted here, and we will continue to engage with the community of Hout Bay. The factory is open, and it will stay open," he said.

He said Oceana was proud of its history in Hout Bay. "We have invested here and have a world-class facility from an odour-suppressing point of view.

"Nothing we will do can stop the smell. We do not know of such technology, and should we find such technology in the future, we will invest in it," he said.

A total of R2m of the R11m will go to upgrading the

plant's chemical scrubbing process. This will help reduce the smell but will not mitigate it completely. The balance will go towards increasing profitability.

Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi attended the briefing to show his support.

"It gives me great pleasure to engage in this announcement, and I need to flag the importance of this achievement.

"The factory has been an anchor of the local economy of Hout Bay for the past 65 years. It remains the largest single operation in Hout Bay. It represents 100 jobs, supporting 100 families in this small community," he said.

Mr Nxesi said Oceana should be commended for its efforts to address the community's concerns by continuing to investigate new odour abatement technologies.

"I would also say to the objectors that closing down the largest economic activity in the community would have created new social problems with negative implications for security and community well being," he said.

Mr Kuttel Oceana prided itself on uplifting the community of Hout Bay with various corporate social investments (CSI).

"We have invested a large amount of disproportionate money into CSIs in the valley, and we will continue to do so – and not once in the three years that we have run at a loss have we neglected our responsibility to

those CSIs.

"We know that the odour is a nuisance to some, and we have not ignored it. We wish it was not, but it is and that is why we have chosen to enhance the positive that we bring to this valley by giving more to the Hout Bay community," he said.

Production foreman Enock Hlatswayo, 37, has been working for Oceana for 15 years.

He said the announcement of the factory's closure had been very disturbing. He would have had to have relocated his wife and three children to St Helena Bay.

"I am very relieved that the factory will remain open and look forward to many more years there. We are like one big family – even management – and we work as a team," he said.

He said he was satisfied with the new working hours and negotiated agreement.

Plant engineer Olwethu Mlaza, 30, said he had just bought a new house and did not want to relocate again.

"It was a very daunting time for me and my family," he said.

He said one other thing about the planned move that had worried him was that while they had been guaranteed work there had been no assurance they would have kept their same positions.

"That alone was a huge issue for me, so naturally I am very pleased that the factory will remain open," he said.



PICTURE: ROSS JANSSEN

■ Earlier this year a small group of Hout Bay Civic Association members marched to the entrance of the factory asking for it to stay open.



■ Stakeholders who attended the meeting on Wednesday.



■ As part of Oceana's corporate social responsibility, the company donated a new minibus to the Hout Bay High School and a fully fitted container that will serve as a Kitchen to the Little Angels Day Care centre in Hangberg on Wednesday November 4. Pictured are Hout Bay High School principal, Juan Julius and vice-principal Patricia van Niekerk with Oceana CEO Francois Kuttel with the minibus



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