

## **'Tough on this little town' Shutdown hits Questa hard**

**By J.R. Logan**

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David Trujillo was in the front row when his bosses broke the news to a roomful of miners Monday (June 2) the Questa mine would be shutting down for good.

"I saw the dismay, the hurt in people's faces. The worry," Trujillo told *The Taos News*. "When it hit, it was just like a big rock."

Trujillo, 58, was an equipment operator at the mine for more than 25 years. He is best known under his radio code: "44-Dave." Like his coworkers, Trujillo relied on the decent paycheck and good benefits the job offered. To be suddenly hit with the words "permanently closed" was hard to stomach.

"It's going to be tough on this little town," Trujillo said. "That mine bought my homes. It bought my vehicles. It raised my family. It helped my family raise their families. It has an impact on everybody."

Trujillo is president of the United Steelworkers local in Questa, and he says Chevron has so far handled the shutdown well. Officials have been straightforward and sympathetic, Trujillo says, and they're going to great lengths to help workers get back on their feet.

"I'm sure it was just as devastating for [Chevron Mining] as it was for us, because we're all a big family here," Trujillo said, adding that he understands the financial reasons behind the corporation's decision to close.

Still, a job at the mine meant a comfortable living (pay for the average worker ranged from \$18 to \$26 an hour, Trujillo said), and the shutdown has left a lot of former employees confused. "This place takes care of us, and I think that's why a lot of people are so hurt," Trujillo said. "In a sense, they sort of feel betrayed."

Trujillo said he's especially concerned for new employees who saw a future in the mine. "They were relying on this place, figuring they had 30 years down the road to pay for their home," Trujillo said. "Those are the ones I really feel for."

Under the terms announced Monday, about 170 hourly employees were sent home and will get 60-days of full pay and benefits as required by federal law. The roughly 120 salaried employees will stay on at the mine until at least the first of August, said Chevron spokesperson Margaret LeJuste.

LeJuste said severance for all employees is spelled out in existing agreements and will be paid at the start of August, through LeJuste said there are ongoing “discussions” between Chevron leadership and the union regarding employee payouts.

Tuesday morning (June 3) Trujillo and Chevron representatives were at a makeshift employee information center on the north side of Questa. About a dozen miners showed up at 10 a.m. for seminars on how to update a résumé, or to get information on training or relocation opportunities.

Laid-off workers bantered about what to do next. One young dad-to-be with a mortgage showed up early to get a jump on his job hunt. Another Questeno talked about taking his heavy machinery skills to the oil fields in West Texas. A couple joked that they were moving to Colorado to grow marijuana. One said in spite of the shutdown, he still planned to take the family to Disneyworld.

Beyond the obvious impact to the Questa economy, the shutdown of the mine will likely affect the culture of the region’s small communities. Trujillo said the mine employed people from places like Amalia, Costilla, Eagle Nest, Penasco, and Mora.

For many, the job at the mine was the only way to stay in this rural places. As has happened during shutdowns in the past, a lot of workers and their families may have to pick up and leave to find work elsewhere. And this time, there’s little hope of coming back to a job at the mine again.

However, ongoing work to decommission the mine and do environmental cleanup may allow some to stay. Chevron officials expect about 100 job openings in reclamation and closure to be available for former mine employees. The company has already posted about 20 positions that, at the moment, are only available to affected Questa employees.

Job fairs are also planned in Questa in the coming weeks to give workers a chance to talk with contractors and explore options for additional job training and employment.

For Trujillo, support from the company and from the community will be key to moving forward in shock of the shutdown. “We’re very strong people, and I know we’ll help each other out,” he said.

Questa Mayor Mark Gallegos told The Taos News the mine’s closure was obviously going to be hard on families and businesses in the community, but he said the cloud of a possible shutdown always hangs over the village. “It’s a tough pill to swallow, but at the same time, with the ups and downs Questa has had to go through before, it’s just made our skin a little thicker,” Gallegos said.