



Blackwater lays off Grizzly workers

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Blackwater Worldwide's recent failure to secure a government contract prompted the security company on Friday to lay off an undisclosed number of workers at its armored personnel carrier facility in Camden County.

Blackwater spokeswoman Ann Tyrrell confirmed the layoffs from the company's Grizzly Armored Truck Manufacturing Division, saying they occurred because three other security companies had outbid Blackwater for a multi-million-dollar contract to build the U.S. Army's joint light tactical vehicle.

"Our employees and independent contractors are our greatest asset and it is always unfortunate when cutbacks become necessary," Tyrrell said. "Because we were not selected for the Army's JLTV contract, manufacturing staff reductions were necessary."

Tyrrell called the downsizing "difficult," but said it was part of the company's "continuing effort to ensure the best value to our customers, and improve the company's efficiency by taking into account the cyclical nature of government contracting."

Tyrrell declined to confirm how many employees were let go.

But during a public appearance in Kitty Hawk in June 2007, Blackwater Worldwide President Gary Jackson said the company had assembled 52 workers, many of them former employees of Ford and Volvo, to produce its Grizzly armored personnel carrier at a brand-new 70,000 square-foot production facility in Camden.

In addition, under the terms of an agreement the company had with the N.C. Department of Commerce for obtaining a \$120,000 grant, Blackwater had to create and maintain up to 60 jobs at the Grizzly plant. At the time, company officials said the average worker's weekly salary would be in excess of \$719.

Jackson said the company had decided to proceed with the Grizzly production facility even though it didn't have a contract with the federal government to build the vehicles.

"The APC is being built because people are dying in Hummers," Jackson said, referring to the vehicles commonly used to transport U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He seemed confident Blackwater would be chosen for the contract because its Grizzlies would be much safer than other armored vehicles in use by the U.S. military. The vehicle was designed to have a top speed of 65 mph and boasts an armored protective system capable of deflecting ordnance as large as .50 caliber rounds.

"We decided we would try to build an armored personnel carrier from the lessons we've learned overseas," Jackson said at the time. "We took a bunch of guys from Currituck and Camden and welders and gave them an Army truck and said 'Go ahead.'"

At the time, Blackwater's plan was to produce one Grizzly each day, he said.

Blackwater is currently Camden's largest employers. Because it operates a lodge, it's also the county's only source of occupancy tax revenue. It was not known Friday what impact the company's downsizing would have.

Commissioner Phil Faison said he was not aware of the downsizing.

"Blackwater is usually pretty tight lipped about things like this — the county is usually the last to know," he said. "My only concern is for the people that were laid off who reside in the county and how it will affect their livelihood."

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