

LAID OFF, LAID LOW BY DOWNTURN

by Jessica Guynn, Contra Costa Times

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For A.J. Kohn, the economic downturn means too many Magnum P.I. reruns. For Sheri Green, it means trimming her budget -- and her tiny Christmas tree with plastic ornaments. For Craig Williams, it means paying more than the occasional afternoon visit to a local bar to chase his misfortune with whiskey and beer. For Erica Gantz, it means contemplating the unthinkable: leaving California in search of a job.

'Tis the season of their discontent. For the pink-slipped and blue, the holidays arrived this year not with a jingle but with a thud. They are looking for work at what even in a booming economy is the toughest time of year. As layoffs spread across industries faster than a cold in kindergarten, the job market has cooled to arctic levels.

"The slowest time of year is December and January to find a job," said Joel Garfinkle, a career coach in San Leandro. "Employers cut down on hiring by 60 to 70 percent. It's a very tight market."

The United States is on pace to record more job losses in 2001 than it has in at least nine years, according to job placement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. The quickened pace of layoffs since Sept. 11 means competition is stiffer than ever. Since the terrorist attacks, U.S. companies have slashed 624,411 jobs, more than in most years. Through the end of November they have slashed 1.8 million jobs, the largest number since Challenger began tallying layoffs in 1993.

Nationally, employment prospects will plummet even further early next year as companies sharply curb hiring and roll out more layoffs, according to projections from a quarterly Bureau of National Affairs Inc. employment survey.

In the starkest evidence yet that California has followed the nation into recession, the state dropped more than 53,000 jobs last month, the sharpest decline in nearly a decade, pushing the unemployment rate to 6 percent. California's deepening economic retrenchment delivered pink slips to stockings in tens of thousands of households, white collar and blue collar alike. The tech-centric Bay Area has been particularly hard hit, shedding nearly 10,000 jobs alone in November.

While the more diversified East Bay economy has fared better, the number of unemployed has doubled since this time last year. And that has doled out plenty of anxiety.

"I don't know what to do with myself," said Green, 33, a Concord mother of two and a payroll manager laid off from a San Ramon company at the end of November. "I don't know how many

