

Eckstrom Tells Military Base Leaders That South Carolina May Face a Perfect Storm of Budget Pressures

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Columbia, S.C. (AP) - Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom warned South Carolina's military base supporters that ongoing budget pressures could merge with future base closures and slash the military's presence in South Carolina.

"It's like a perfect storm, with all these financial pressures coming together at once," Eckstrom said, adding that he didn't know whether it was going to be possible to forestall what will happen.

Several members of the Military Base Task Force said they believe the state's military communities should prepare for another round of base closures that could come by 2015. While the state won new missions during the last round in 2005, it might not be so lucky the next time.

Panel members also said they feared across-the-board federal spending cuts to defense and domestic programs that could take place March 1 with the so-called "fiscal cliff."

Task force executive coordinator William Holland, a retired two-star Air Force general, said the military has started planning in case the across-the-board cuts take effect. They could mean cutting exercises and training, furloughs for civilian workers and ending programs that are taken for granted, like air shows with top-notch Air Force or Navy pilots.

"It would be a hollowing out of the force within a year's time," Holland said.

Task force members suggested the state pay to send representatives to Washington to make the case ahead of any budget cuts.

Eckstrom said the task force has asked the General Assembly for \$150,000 to assist military communities and that it might be possible to double that amount with "carry-over" funds that have accumulated in past years.

"Whether there is sequestration or not, defense cuts are coming," said Mary Graham, representing the Charleston Chamber of Commerce. Graham said she has been in Washington recently to argue on behalf of her military bases, which include the Army-Navy Joint Base Charleston and the cyber-centered U.S. Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center-Atlantic.

Last year, state figures show the U.S. military pumped nearly \$16 billion into South Carolina's economy and it supports about 140,000 uniformed and civilian jobs.

Maj. Gen. Lester Eisner, the South Carolina National Guard's No. 2 commander, said that the state's 11,000-member force would also come under the knife because of the federal cuts. "Once the erosion starts, it's hard to stop it," he said.

Over the past decade, the Pentagon's main defense budget has nearly doubled, from \$297 billion in 2001 to more than \$520 billion. The amount does not include the billions spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tea partyers and fiscal conservatives recently elected to Congress have shown a willingness to cut defense, traditionally considered almost untouchable.

Susanne M. Schafer can be reached on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/susannemarieap>.

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