Hundreds Laid off at Wash. Hanford Nuclear Site

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YAKIMA, Wash. (AP) — State and federal officials are still analyzing the impact of layoffs and furloughs at south-central Washington's Hanford Nuclear Reservation, but outsiders say they are sure to slow cleanup at the nation's most contaminated nuclear site.

The Department of Energy announced that 235 people will be laid off, and more than 2,500 will be furloughed for several weeks, as a result of automatic federal budget cuts.

About 9,000 people work at the site, which produced plutonium for the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal beginning in World War II and through the Cold War.

"You can't furlough 20 percent of the workforce without having an impact on the work," said Gary Petersen of the Tri-City Development Council, an economic development group targeting the communities near Hanford from its offices in Kennewick, Wash.

"There's no question that the longer you delay cleanup, the longer it's going to take and the higher the cost," he said.

The federal government created Hanford in the 1940s as part of the top-secret Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb. Today, it is the nation's most complex environmental cleanup project.

The U.S. government spends some $2 billion each year on the cleanup there — roughly one-third of its entire budget for nuclear cleanup nationally.

Several contractors are digging up contaminated debris and soil, tearing down buildings and mothballing nuclear reactors, treating contaminated groundwater, and removing millions of gallons of radioactive waste from underground tanks for treatment at a plant under construction there.

The Energy Department has said the layoffs largely affected union employees who practice a particular trade, such as pipefitters, while the furloughs targeted nonunion office workers, including administrative, engineering and safety professionals.

Those skilled workers could look elsewhere for jobs, rather than accept smaller paychecks, creating a shortage of such workers at Hanford, said Tom Carpenter, executive director of the Hanford watchdog group Hanford Challenge.

The budget cuts aren't a surprise, Carpenter said, "but it's awful.

"We can't afford to lose that highly trained workforce on such an important mission as nuclear waste cleanup," he said.

In terms of environmental damage, state and federal officials already are wrestling with six leaking underground waste tanks at the site, raising concerns about any delays to emptying them.

There are 177 tanks holding millions of gallons of toxic, radioactive waste. Sixty-seven of the 149 tanks that have just a single wall are known to have leaked in the past, but only 10 of those tanks have been emptied so far.

State officials already had concerns that upcoming deadlines for emptying more tanks in 2014 might not be met, thanks to technical problems and limited storage space in the remaining tanks with double walls, said Dieter Bohrmann, spokesman for the state Department of Ecology.

But any changes to those deadlines will require negotiations between the Energy Department, the state and the Environmental Protection Agency, he said.

Federal officials have proposed a plan to ship waste from five of the six leaking tanks to New Mexico. However, that proposal will take at least two years as the federal government seeks necessary permits.

The Department of Energy's Office of River Protection, which oversees tank cleanup and plant construction, said its budget had been cut by $92 million. That money will largely come from tank cleanup. There is a fixed budget for the plant.

The Energy Department's Richland Operations Office said its budget will be reduced by $79 million. That office oversees three contractors and numerous subcontractors responsible for cleaning up the Columbia River corridor, tearing down buildings, mothballing nuclear reactors, treating groundwater and digging up contaminated debris and soil.

The cuts within the Energy Department's budget are the result of debate in Congress, where Republicans and President Barack Obama are fighting over how to curtail the nation's debt.

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