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Spending cuts could mean pain for many

By: Jessica Wehrman – February 10, 2013

Hate the security lines at the airport? You might soon hate them more.

Enjoy eating meat? That steak might get more pricey soon — and possibly more risky.

Irritated with the long hold times when you're calling the IRS? Well, get used to that hold music.

Experts say that if Congress goes ahead with planned mandatory cuts to discretionary spending, the government won't shut down. But Americans would feel an impact.

As part of a 2011 deal raising the debt ceiling, Congress and President Barack Obama agreed to slash \$1.2 trillion from the federal budget. The cuts, totaling \$85 billion this year, would be mandatory and across the board. Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid would be exempt.

Congress could undo the cuts before they take effect next month. But many congressional Republicans are signaling that they might let them go through, saying that poorly thought-out cuts are better than no cuts at all, and that neither the Senate nor Obama has put forth a reasonable plan to cut spending.

The irony is that when the cuts were first proposed, no one thought they would happen. They were designed as a punishment to spur a 12-member "supercommittee" to come up with a plan. It didn't.

"This was the poison pill that was so painful that it was going to force Congress to act," said Michael Gessel of the Dayton Development Coalition, which lobbies on behalf of the defense community there. "This is the action President Obama publicly and emphatically stated was not going to happen. And yet, here we are, making plans for it to happen."

Both sides have pushed measures aiming to avert the cuts — called "sequestration" — but have reached an impasse. House Republicans argue that these cuts might be their last, best opportunity to force Obama to address costly entitlements.

While it's impossible to predict exactly what will happen, several say the possibilities are grim.

Scott Lilly, a former Democratic staff director for the House Appropriations Committee who now works for the left-leaning Center for American Progress, said furloughed air-traffic controllers will mean airports will have to eliminate flights to comply with transportation-safety laws.

Courts will face a backlog, and there won't be enough marshals to protect judges and juries, he predicted. The National Weather Service also could suffer during an era in which catastrophic storms are becoming increasingly common. Factories that process meat will face fewer inspections, meaning some might close if there are too few food inspectors to look at their products, Lilly said.

The White House estimates that if the cuts go through, the Food and Drug Administration will conduct 2,100 fewer inspections and that its Food Safety and Inspection Service might have to furlough all employees for about two weeks.

Further, up to 373,000 seriously mentally ill adults and emotionally disturbed children could go untreated.

"Most Americans, at least the ones I know, have a reasonable expectation that government services will be provided," said Jim Dyer, a former Republican staff director for the House Appropriations Committee who now works for the Podesta Group, a Washington, D.C., lobbying firm. "When that doesn't happen, people don't like it very much."

At Ohio State University, officials are preparing for cuts of anywhere between \$15 million and \$80 million, said Caroline Whitacre, vice president for research. About \$470 million of the \$934 million spent on research in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 2012, came from the federal government.

"The sad thing is, this is at a time when we have unprecedented tools to do research, unprecedented cooperativity, a lot of international collaboration. ... The world is at our feet in terms of research," she said. "To be kind of hamstrung by some federal dollars is really tragic."

But not everyone sees the sequester in such apocalyptic terms. Michael Tanner of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute said it's a "silly, blunt instrument" but hardly devastating or crippling.

This sentiment is shared by many Republicans on Capitol Hill: The government, they say, has a spending problem. The federal debt is about \$16.5 trillion, although the Congressional Budget Office projected last week that the deficit has dropped to about \$845 billion — the first time in four years it has been below \$1 trillion. In other words, the government borrows 24 cents of every dollar it spends.

But no solution will be easy.

"Whether it's the sequester or entitlement reform, when you have a trillion a year in reduction of spending, there's going to be pain," said Rep. Pat Tiberi, R-Genoa Township. "Whether you fix entitlement programs or there are more cuts to discretionary spending, people will feel pain."

But the alternative, he said, is worse: The nation's spending is unsustainable.

"This is a crisis we see coming right at us."