

## GOP plan would slash 200,000 to 300,000 federal jobs

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The federal workforce is going to be cut — all that's left to decide is how fast and how deep.

Unions, Democratic lawmakers and other traditional allies of federal employees, in the past, have steadfastly opposed any attempts to trim the federal ranks. But at a May 26 hearing called "Rightsizing the federal workforce," a union leader conceded that cuts may be appropriate as the cash-strapped government reconsiders its role.

"The realities of our federal budget situation are such that some downsizing of federal agencies is both necessary and proper," said Bill Dougan, president of the National Federation of Federal Employees and chairman of the Federal Workers Alliance, a coalition of 21 smaller federal unions. "We understand that fully."

At some agencies, the downsizing has already begun.

The Agriculture Department last week announced that budget cuts forced it to offer buyouts to 544 employees and offer early retirement to other eligible employees.

And the U.S. Postal Service on May 27 sent reduction-in-force notices to more than 2,400 management-level employees.

Experts say more agencies could follow as they face mounting pressure from tight budgets and lawmakers who see cutting the federal workforce as a visible and politically safe way to make a dent in the deficit.

The White House's bipartisan deficit reduction commission last year said trimming 10 percent from the federal workforce would save \$13.2 billion in one year, and several Republican lawmakers have echoed that call. The salaries, bonuses, locality payments and other direct compensation for 2.1 million executive branch employees is expected to hit \$177 billion in 2012.

"There's clearly tremendous budgetary pressures, and both sides of the aisle are saying get the deficit under control," said John Palguta, vice president for policy at the Partnership for Public Service. "It's going to be tight times for federal employees."

At last month's hearing, Democratic lawmakers such as Rep. Gerry Connolly of Virginia — who represents thousands of federal employees — seemed unable to land any significant blows challenging the hearing's premise that the federal workforce should be cut.

This, combined with the consensus among Republican lawmakers that the federal workforce has grown too large in recent years, suggests the political momentum on Capitol Hill has shifted toward cuts as part of a broader deficit reduction strategy.

Many Republicans have introduced legislation or voiced proposals to cut the federal workforce. The cuts they call for range from 10 percent — roughly 200,000 jobs — to 15 percent, or 300,000 jobs.

Some proposals don't outline a clear target for cuts but rather call for hiring one new employee to replace every two or three who leave federal service. Roughly 90,000 federal employees retire each year.

No lawmaker has proposed requiring agencies to lay off employees, and all proposals seek to reduce the federal ranks through a combination of attrition and hiring freezes. A job-cutting bill could be approved either as part of the 2012 budget, a deal raising the debt limit, or on its own. Lawmakers are likely to consider at least some of those bills later this year.

Although Dougan conceded that staffing cuts are likely, he opposes Republicans' bills because they don't require the government to scale back its mission and responsibilities at the same time.

Trying to accomplish the same level of duties with a greatly slashed workforce will backfire, he warned, forcing agencies to rely more on contractors and costing more money.

"If Congress is serious about truly reducing the size of government, then lawmakers are going to have to make the tough choices about which programs to reshape, scale back or discontinue altogether," Dougan said. "I think both the contracting workforce and the federal workforce need to be on the table, with respect to looking for places to save money. There's no question about that."

Experts say there are no easy answers when trying to find places to trim the federal workforce without degrading the government's ability to perform its missions.

The Clinton administration cut about 350,000 workers from the government. But Palguta said part of that was made possible because of a historic shift toward automation and computerization, which allowed the government to get rid of much of its remaining clerical staff. That kind of opportunity doesn't exist today, he said.

Agencies slashed budget, acquisition, human resources and other support positions during the 1990s. But that ended up being a mistake, Palguta said. The government realized it needed people to help manage contracts and oversee personnel matters, and had to rebuild those functions.

"I don't see an across-the-board, this occupation is most ripe for reduction," Palguta said. "We don't want our professional employees spending 50 percent of their time on low-level work and wasting their resources that way."

Palguta said a 10 percent cut would be far too drastic. He expects agencies will cut roughly 50,000 from their ranks over the next few years.

Mike Hager, former acting director of the Office of Personnel Management, said he supports a 10 percent reduction, adding that managers must pore over their staffs to find which jobs could remain unfilled when someone leaves, and to divide departing employees' work among those remaining.

"I do not see any evidence that the government has implemented the efficiencies and productivity improvements that are out there," Hager said. "Departments will scream, 'we had 10 percent more head count a year ago,' but they'll have to find more efficient ways to do their jobs."

Chris Edwards, a budget expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the government should focus on cutting the Defense Department's massive 770,000-person civilian workforce.

He said lawmakers such as Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., who seek to exempt Defense from staffing reductions, are making a mistake.

"Republicans have blinders on when it comes to the DoD," Edwards said. "That same kind of waste-inducing bureaucracy is every bit as evident in the Pentagon as in other departments."

Edwards also said agencies can cut jobs by closing unnecessary post offices, Agriculture Department farm service offices, unemployment offices and other small facilities throughout the country, especially if those offices can better serve the public by going online.

"Why does a farmer need a local farm office?" Edwards said. "He can use the Internet."

Congress deserves most of the blame for the problem, Edwards said, because lawmakers fight tooth and nail to block office closures in their districts.