



Interest groups barrage Congress with sequester pleas

Lobbyists and interest groups are trying to forestall what now seems inevitable: automatic across-the-board cuts totaling \$85 billion slated to take effect Friday.

By: Fredreka Schouten – February 28, 2013

Hematologists are sending tweets to members of Congress, warning that looming cuts to federal research funding threaten to slow medical advances for diseases such as sickle-cell anemia and lymphoma. Defense manufacturers have produced studies showing job losses will top 2 million.

Hundreds of elected officials from cash-strapped counties will swarm Capitol Hill in the coming days to decry reductions to federal grant programs that help fund everything from libraries to sewage systems. Public-sector unions began running television ads in seven cities Thursday that target Republicans and warn of financial pain for millions.

Lobbyists and interest groups representing almost every corner of the country have spent months and millions trying to forestall what now seems inevitable: automatic across-the-board cuts totaling an estimated \$85 billion that will kick in starting Friday without action by Congress and the White House.

The so-called sequester, the byproduct of an ongoing budget war between President Obama and congressional Republicans, intentionally imposes indiscriminate cuts to nearly all government functions with the exception of military personnel and social safety-net programs, including Medicare and Social Security. The across-the-board cuts were included in a 2011 budget law as a fail-safe mechanism, triggered only if political leaders couldn't arrive at a better solution to tackle the federal government's growing \$16.4 trillion debt. They didn't come up with a deal.

County officials "just assumed that this would get fixed," said Matt Chase, executive director of the National Association of Counties, which kicks off a five-day conference Saturday in Washington that will focus, in part, on how to cope with sequestration.

"At the local level, they see their constituents every day; they can't hide from them," Chase said. "When they have a problem like this, they fix it. They can't keep punting these decisions every six months."

Across the country, elected officials, advocacy groups, business owners and others who rely on the federal government are bracing for the cuts.

The looming sequestration already is taking a toll on companies with big defense contracts.

"With this degree of uncertainty, companies are already holding back on investments," said Cord Sterling, vice president of legislative affairs for the Aerospace Industries Association, which has bombarded lawmakers with studies, outlining the economic toll if a planned 9% cut in this year's Defense Department budget takes effect.

"This is uncharted territory for all of us" because the government has never imposed cuts this significant, said Emily Holubowich, who helps lead a coalition of more than 3,000 organizations that oppose the sequester. Members of Congress listen to their constituents, but it's hard for most Americans to gauge the impact of reductions that haven't happened yet and could roll out over weeks, she said.

"It's like that old saying, 'You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone,'" Holubowich said.

The sequester's effect, she said, "will be like watching a multiple-car pileup on the highway that's going in slow motion" – as community health centers turn away patients, national parks curtail services and airport security lines grow longer as Transportation Security Administration workers are furloughed. Some of the biggest effects won't take place until April because officials must give many federal workers at least 30 days' notice before sending them home without pay.

Deficit hawks counter that the most aggressive lobbying and dire predictions are coming from special interests with a vested interest in government spending.

"If you are a government employee or you have a government contract, the chances are that, at least in the short term, you will feel pain," said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "But as far as the country and the economy overall, we are talking about cutting government spending back to 2009 levels," he said. "The country survived 2009."

Janis Abkowitz, president of the 14,000-member American Society of Hematology, said the \$1.6 billion in sequester-related cuts now slated to hit the National Institutes of Health's \$30.8 billion annual budget are so painful because they come after years of eroding federal support for biomedical research.

Abkowitz, a doctor who heads the hematology division at the University of Washington School of Medicine, and Brian Druker, an oncologist who runs a cancer institute at the Oregon Health & Science University, said the federal government is uniquely positioned to underwrite long-term research it takes to find medical breakthroughs.

Druker's research helped develop a drug that transformed chronic myeloid leukemia, a cancer of the blood cells, from a disease that usually killed patients in five years to a chronic, manageable illness. The drug, Gleevec, targets and destroys cancer cells while leaving healthy cells alone.

Druker said he has relied on NIH grants, ranging from \$300,000 to \$500,000 a year, since 1985. "Our capability of making advances has never been greater," he said. "But it's a travesty that at the same time we can make such rapid advances, our funding is decreasing."

Representatives of the hematologists' group have visited Capitol Hill in recent weeks to press their cause, sent letters to newspapers and now are tweeting videos to congressional offices that touting the benefits of their research.

Few communities expect to be spared the sequester's effect.

At Glacier National Park, a million acres of soaring peaks in northwest Montana, officials must trim \$680,000 from this year's \$14 million budget.

Denise Germann, a Glacier spokeswoman, said park officials are still trying to determine what will be cut, but options include reducing the roughly 370 seasonal employees who work in the park each summer, delaying the opening of park facilities, such as campgrounds, and pushing back snow-plowing on the scenic 50-mile long Going-to-the-Sun Road that winds through the park's interior. The road typically opens in late June. Workers, researchers and local businesses all have called the park seeking answers, she said.

In Kalispell, Mont., near the park's western entrance, the local Chamber of Commerce president Joe Unterreiner said he will urge park officials to open the road on schedule. About 2 million people head to Glacier each year, and the road "is one of the main reasons they come," he said.

Many groups lobbying Congress already are turning their attention to the next fiscal deadline menacing Washington: late March when the government will shut down entirely unless Congress approves another bill to temporarily extend government funding.

Since late 2010, the federal government has been funded by temporary measures, known as "continuing resolutions" – part of the long-running budget stalemate between the political parties. The current measure, passed last October, is set to expire March 27 -- possibly providing an opportunity for Obama and Congress to include a deal to end the sequester in the next temporary spending bill.

"I'm hopeful they can solve this sometime in March if they have a mind to," said Sterling, the aerospace association's top lobbyist.