

Military officials warn of effects of sequestration

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WASHINGTON — Top Defense Department officials cautioned Thursday that so-called sequestration could lead to a hollow military — warning that the across-the-board federal budget cuts due to take place Jan. 2 would mean decreased training, pay and preparedness for the nation’s armed forces.

Their comments came during a two-hour hearing held by the House Armed Services Committee to discuss the potential impact on defense preparedness of the automatic budget reductions, which will occur if Congress does not pass a bill to reduce the deficit by \$1.2 trillion over the next decade.

Sequestration would result in “a less-capable, less-modern, less-ready force,” according to a joint statement by DOD officials who addressed the committee: Undersecretary of Defense Robert Hale, Army Gen. Lloyd Austin III, Adm. Mark Ferguson, Marine Corps Gen. Joseph Dunford and Air Force Gen. Larry Spencer.

Under terms of the 2011 legislative deal that allowed for an increase in the federal debt ceiling,

nearly \$110 billion in cuts — split evenly between defense and non-defense domestic programs — would take place within the next year under sequestration. Over the next decade, sequestration would mean an approximately \$600 billion reduction in defense spending alone.

Ferguson said, overall, sequestration would “reduce funding for the Navy by nearly \$12 billion” in 2013, causing an immediate negative impact on operations and maintenance.

He warned that naval operations would experience “fewer flying hours, fewer under way days” and “a disproportionate share of reductions.” These, in turn, “will have cumulative effects,” including “reduced funding for research labs and technology programs,” he added.

Foreseeing a reduction from the Navy’s current fleet of approximately 285 ships, Ferguson added: “Over time, you will see the Navy get smaller — to a force of 230, 235 ships in the future if this is sustained for 10 years. “We will see an inability [to] complete maintenance schedules in a timely fashion...which will result in smaller force less available to respond to crisis.”

While the Coast Guard was not represented at Thursday’s hearing, Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., said the “folks in New London would be hit too,” referring to both Coast Guard Station New London, which responds to 1,300 marine distress cases annually, and the Coast Guard Academy, which enrolls 1,046 cadets on full scholarship.

Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, who represents the district where Portsmouth Naval Shipyard is located, also serves on the Armed Services Committee, but was not present for Thursday’s hearing. Pingree later said she was unable to attend the hearing because she was meeting with constituents from her district as well as the legal team for Pussy Riot — the Russian band that recently had three members sentenced to prison after performing songs critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Pingree said she thinks the sequestration issue will be largely dealt with “when Congress gets back” for a post-election lameduck session later this year, while adding she is “disappointed that we’re procrastinating.”

Reflecting the position taken by the White House in a report on the impact of sequestration released late last week, Hale repeatedly reminded the committee that DOD would rather avoid sequestration altogether than discuss how to minimize its effects.

“If you’re driving at brick wall at 60 miles an hour, you need to avoid the wall, not pick up the pieces after you hit it,” he said.

To that end, the two-hour session witnessed calls from both sides of the political aisle for a compromise to avoid the impact of sequestration — even though there has been little, if any, progress toward reaching a solution on which both parties could agree.

The House is scheduled to vote Friday on a motion to adjourn until after the November election, and several members of the committee declared they planned to vote against the motion in the hope of making progress toward heading off sequestration.

In addition to several Democratic legislators at Thursday’s hearing, at least one Republican, Rep. Mike Coffman of Colorado, said he planned to vote against the motion.

Declared Rep. Courtney: “I just hope, frankly, that the motion to adjourn is going to fail. I personally believe that there is still a [political] center in this place, which is ready to roll up its sleeves and find a path between the two sides.”

But other attendees pointed the finger elsewhere. Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga., said while “the House of Representatives in this Congress [has] passed five different measures to avoid sequestration, neither the president nor the Senate have shown any leadership.”

“It’s time for [President Obama] to lead, follow or get the hell out of the way of this country,” Scott declared, saying he wants more clarity from Obama on what kind of deficit reduction alternative the White House would favor over sequestration.

Should the United States topple over the “fiscal cliff” — the current Washington buzzword for sequestration — Hale said the military is prepared to develop detailed plans to deal with it. But the Pentagon “will wait as long as we can to begin this process,” he added.

“I feel like I spend most of my days lately planning for things that I fervently hope won’t happen,” Hale said.