

[Specter Of Big Defense Cuts Prompts Big Worries](#)

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WASHINGTON — The boom times are over for the nation's military.

After more than doubling in the past 10 years, Pentagon budgets are in for big cuts from Congress in coming years. No one yet knows exactly what will be cut or how deeply the cuts will go, but everyone knows they're coming.

In North Carolina, where military communities already are preparing for the drawdown of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, officials wonder what cuts will mean for defense contractors and the size of the state's force structure.

Across the nation, it's a similar story, reflected by simple numbers: Defense spending hit a record high of \$553 billion this year, excluding the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And it must be cut by \$350 billion over the next 10 years because of the debt-limit agreement passed by Congress last month.

But that's just the beginning: If Congress' "supercommittee" doesn't reach agreement in the next two months on a plan to reduce the nation's deficit by at least \$1.2 trillion, automatically triggered cuts would slash as much as \$600 billion from defense and security programs over the next decade.

Marion Blakey, president and chief executive officer of the Aerospace Industries Association, said the possibility of large automatic cuts is "the abyss" facing members of the supercommittee. And she said the economic risks are very high, with the aerospace and defense industry supporting 2.9 million jobs in all 50 states.

"Make no mistake — combining the cuts already incurred and the potential for more defense cuts, hundreds of thousands of American workers' jobs are at risk," she said at a news conference last week at the National Press Club in Washington.

The uncertainty has created much angst across the nation, particularly in states that rely heavily on U.S. defense spending.

Military families are watching the wrangling over the nation's deficit with particular unease. Many troops and their families fret that pay and retirement benefits will suffer in coming years, even though no specific proposals have been announced.

In Washington state, Sheena Switzer, 23, already worries that her husband, an Iraq War veteran, might not receive any retirement pay.

"If we stick this out for 20 years and they don't give you a pension, then we just wasted 20 years," said Switzer, whose husband is a member of Joint Base Lewis-McChord's 4th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division.

On Capitol Hill, Democrats and Republicans alike are concerned that less military spending would hurt local economies and lead to job losses. The specter of the automatic cuts is most worrisome to many members.

"You'd have a major, major cut in defense — it's unacceptable," said Rep. Norm Dicks of Washington state, a longtime proponent of defense spending and the top-ranked Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee. "There's no way to speculate what would happen. But I think at some point — if there are cuts of that magnitude — there would have to be a reduction in force."

In North Carolina, retired Marine Col. John Nicholson, the military affairs adviser to North Carolina Gov. Bev Perdue, said the governor recently led a series of military summits at base communities around the state, with the possibility of military downsizing looming over these discussions.

"We know that the Marine Corps is going to reduce the size of force structure once we get out of Afghanistan," Nicholson said. "We don't know what that number is going to be, but we know there will be a reduction."

The state, which has been trying to increase the number of defense contracting jobs, has about 800,000 veterans, one of the largest populations in the nation. It's also home to the Army's Fort Bragg and Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, as well as Seymour Johnson Air Force Base.

At Washington state's Lewis-McChord, leaders have signaled that, after a decade of growth, cuts are on the horizon. The base employed some 15,000 civilians in 2009. It has instituted a hiring freeze for most jobs.

Jay Ebbeson, spokesman for the base's Madigan Army Medical Center, said the hospital is taking a harder look at filling open positions and is working to reduce expenses that aren't directly related to patient care.

"It is a new environment; it's a new time," Ebbeson said. "We're watching how we do things."

At Fort Benning, a sprawling Army installation outside of Columbus, Ga., the installation is bracing for projected cuts that would slash 15 percent from the post's existing civilian payroll in fiscal 2012, which begins Oct. 1.

Fort Campbell, an Army base on the Kentucky-Tennessee border that is home to the 101st Airborne, is also preparing for cuts, with the installation's new commander promising to assess

which programs offered to the more than 20,000 service members and their families are most essential.

In Illinois, Democratic Rep. Jerry Costello, whose St. Louis-area district is home to Scott Air Force Base and numerous defense contractors, said he is "following cuts to the defense budget very closely for any potential impact on the region."

And in Pennsylvania, Democratic Sen. Bob Casey said he wants the supercommittee to put a priority on job creation in addition to cutting spending, noting that Penn State University's Applied Research Laboratory is an important source of jobs in Centre County.

Nationally, the size of the defense cuts will be decided, either directly or indirectly, by the 12-member supercommittee created by Congress as part of its debt-limit agreement.

Defense advocates are comforted that the committee, which began meeting two weeks ago, is headed by two members who represent states with a large military presence: Democratic Sen. Patty Murray of Washington state and Republican Rep. Jeb Hensarling of Texas. And one of its members, Republican Sen. Jon Kyl of Arizona, has vowed to resign from the panel if it tries to approve a plan with more defense cuts.

Of course, many cheer the thought of a scaled-down Pentagon.

Democratic Rep. Barney Frank of Massachusetts, who long has called for less Pentagon spending, is among those who want the supercommittee to focus first on defense cuts. Last year, Frank helped create a task force that recommended cuts of \$960 billion between 2011 and 2020.

As they work to rein in spending, Pentagon officials have already acknowledged that they're looking at everything, including pension costs.

President Barack Obama heightened concerns for families this month by proposing changes in the health insurance plan that the Defense Department offers to retirees and military families: They would have to pay \$200 a year for the service if Congress adopts the plan.

Switzer, the wife of the Lewis-McChord soldier, is familiar with watching the machinations of Congress. In April, when the federal government nearly shut down in a dispute over spending, she feared missing bill payments. She said her family of five couldn't afford to skip a check.

Under a plan proposed by the Pentagon's Defense Business Board, service members would set up savings accounts in the style of 401K plans to replace traditional pensions.

But like many young families, the Switzers don't have money to save. They have three kids and a car payment to juggle on a junior enlisted soldier's salary. They receive food stamps and have about \$150 left for groceries after they pay their bills from each paycheck.

"We're not living in luxury; we're on the poverty line," she said. "It's not like we're taking all the taxpayers' money and we're floating in dough."