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NASA move could kill up to 2,000 Utah jobs

A NASA official has told Congress it intends to begin shutting down the Constellation moon-rocket program, a development that, if carried out, could result in the loss of thousands of jobs in Utah at companies such as Alliant Techsystems.

In a letter to Congress earlier this week, NASA Administrator Charles Bolden said the space agency is facing a \$991 million shortfall in Constellation program funding this year. He pointed to the need to comply with the federal Anti-Deficiency Act, which requires contractors to set aside enough money to cover termination costs when a program is cancelled.

"Given this estimated shortfall, the Constellation program cannot continue all of its planned FY2010 activities within the resources available," Bolden wrote. "Under the Anti-Deficiency Act, NASA has no choice but to correct this situation."

Utah's Alliant Techsystems, which is building the first stage of the Ares 1 rocket that is being designed to take astronauts into space, could be a big loser. To date, though, ATK hasn't received any notice from NASA about its intentions.

"We have not received any word from NASA to cease work on our Ares contract," said spokeswoman Trina Patterson.

That notice, though, may come later, according to NASA spokesman Michael Braukus.

Over the next several weeks, NASA Constellaion project directors will be going over their numbers to determine where they can save money and redeploy resources, he said.

"Once they are ready then they will begin to contact the contractors [such as ATK]" to let them know the situation.

Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, has estimated that as many as 2,000 Utahns are involved in the Constellation program.

He blames the Obama administration, which indicated last fall that it wanted to cancel the moon-rocket program for trying to circumvent a Congressional prohibition put into place last year. That prohibition was designed to prevent NASA from cutting back payments this year to contractors.

"This latest attempt by the administration to force an early termination ... is nothing more than a disingenuous legal maneuver to circumvent statutory language that was put in place to prevent this very type of action," Bishop said in a statement released Thursday. Constellation proponents in Congress, who include all five of Utah's elected leaders, are fighting to retain funding.

Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, a member of the appropriations committee, said he believes they have a 50-50 shot of fighting off the president's plan to scrap Ares in favor of commercially developed vehicles that the government would lease rides on.

"I haven't run across anyone outside of the administration who thinks this is a good idea," he said.

One thing that may work in their favor is that Democrats are having trouble pushing a budget during an election year when economic issues are at the forefront. If a budget can't be agreed to, then NASA would continue next year under the existing plan, which would forbid the space agency from dropping Constellation and ATK's work on Ares.

"The chances of that are better than 50-50," Bennett said.