



NASA contractors preparing for the worst

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The number of layoffs that face NASA contractors in the Houston area is unknown at this point, but major Constellation and shuttle program contractors are preparing for the worst.

NASA administrators invoked the Anti-Deficiency Act, which requires federal contractors to set aside a portion of payments in case a program is canceled.

NASA estimates contractors are short \$991 million of money the companies must withhold, and must cut back spending on the Constellation program to account for the shortfall.

Lockheed Martin, the developer of the Orion crew capsule, will remove 600 employees and subcontractors off the company's Constellation work to meet the act's requirement, spokeswoman Linda Singleton said.

President Barack Obama proposed on April 15 redeveloping Orion as a crew rescue taxi for the International Space Station instead of an exploration vehicle.

The company will try to transfer some employees to other internal jobs, but layoffs are inevitable, Singleton said.

United Space Alliance, a subcontractor for Lockheed Martin and Alliant Techsystems on Constellation work, does not have a clear number of employees who might lose their jobs, spokeswoman Kari Fluegel said.

"We're still flying shuttles, and some people work both programs," she said. "There's not a clear line in the sand of who will lose their job yet."

Most of Boeing's work on Constellation's Ares I rocket is done in Huntsville, Ala. The company will reassign about 40 employees in Houston involved with the project, spokesman Ed Memi said.

Layoffs for Houston area workers will come, however, once the space shuttle retires, the date of which is also uncertain.

“Once the shuttles retire, about 1,000 people will be laid off,” he said. “A vast majority are in Houston.”

The possibility of an additional flight in 2011 will keep more Boeing employees on the payroll longer, Memi said.

NASA gave Boeing a \$18 million commercial crew vehicle contract for the next fiscal year based on Obama’s budget proposal.

The contract won’t result in new jobs, but it might lead to greater opportunities if Congress approves Obama’s proposed budget.

The budget would allow commercial developers to design a vehicle to taxi astronauts to the space station.

Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership officials have prepared for layoffs once the shuttle fleet retires, President Bob Mitchell said.

Mitchell thinks the final launch, set for November, might be pushed back to spring 2011, and Congress might approve an extension bill to add another flight after the final two.

The partnership worked with Workforce Solutions, a human-resource service for residents in a 13-county Gulf Coast region, to open the Aerospace Transition Center, 16921 El Camino Real, in Houston.

The center opened in May to help NASA contractors who have been laid off. The center provides former aerospace employees with free career counseling, résumé reviews, workshops and other services to help them find new jobs.