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DNR facing crisis, plans layoffs, furloughs

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The S.C. Department of Natural Resources, struggling after years of withering budget cuts, can no longer make its payroll, the agency's director told staff members.

"We are facing a financial crisis within the agency," Director John Frampton said in a letter recently distributed among the state agency's 689 personnel. The letter warns employees to expect a staff reduction of at least 50 people as well as 10-day furloughs in the coming fiscal year.

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dnr.sc.gov

The moves are planned as the agency continues to grapple with funding cuts that have led to the loss of one in every five employees. That includes 79 law enforcement officers, or nearly 25 percent of the force.

"We're not hemorrhaging anymore. We've got our limbs off," Frampton told The Post and Courier. "We're in a critical position.

I know every agency is suffering. (But) I don't know what we're going to look like when we come out of this."

The agency already has taken numerous cost-saving actions, including a hiring freeze, closing 16 offices and combining the fisheries and law-enforcement divisions.

"I don't know what else we can cut. We're going to lose our ability to regulate, and that's a real threat."

The letter came after the state Budget and Control Board forced a 5 percent cut in the current budget across state agencies in December in response to tax revenue coming in below projections, and as the Legislature mulls further cuts in the fiscal year starting in July.

For DNR, this last cut came with the agency's law enforcement down to about 250 officers to cover the state's 46 counties, its coastal and offshore waters -- raising concern about the ability to provide public safety, much less foster wildlife and game. They are spread so thin that one county has no resident officer and four other counties have only one.

Wildlife officers across the state have been forced to pick and choose patrols and investigations, concentrating on high-use times and places. The division is considering raising fees as well as charging fees for high-use locations and activities.

The region that covers all coastal counties and inland as far as lakes Marion and Moultrie is down to only a few more than 50 officers. Away from high population areas like Charleston, they are virtually the only police on the water. They handle everything from calls about coyotes to hunters using lights at night, help enforce federal laws on offshore fishing and help in emergency search-and-rescue operations.

"There's no question we're feeling stressed," said Capt. Chisolm Frampton, who is not related to John Frampton. They will be reduced to a "core mission," he said, cutting back on high-visibility deterrents such as routine patrols.

The coverage gaps already have led to more violators, said Col. Alvin Taylor. Officers writing tickets this week for hunters violating laws were told repeatedly, "What are you doing here? I thought y'all didn't have any officers in Marion County." More people out on the water are stealing from crab pots, dragging nets to shrimp illegally, running channel nets, even littering, officers said.

"We're going to have times where we're just not going to have officers out there," Taylor said. "We're a small force to begin with (before staff cuts) to do all we have to do. If there's a good thing in it, it's forced us to work smarter. But our smarts are about run out. If the numbers continue to go down, I don't have any answers. Some things just aren't going to get done. I just hope the public understands."

The agency already has lost nearly half its state funding, Frampton's letter said, cut from \$31 million in fiscal year 2000-01 to \$17 million in the current year.

Rep. Annette Young, R-Summerville, and vice chairwoman of the House Ways and Means Committee, said the question is not whether an agency will be spared further budget cuts but how deep the additional cuts will be. DNR is not the only agency at a critical point, she said. "We're going to look at everything," Young said.

Senate leader Glenn McConnell, R-Charleston, said the legislators must take a close look at DNR and determine whether the agency is providing more services than its mission calls for. For instance, McConnell said DNR should not provide an aircraft for the governor's travels nor should it pay the salaries for his security detail, as it has in the past.

"We need to make sure that DNR's law enforcement activities are aimed directly at their mission and don't spill over. The question is, what are the priorities?" McConnell said.

Board Chairman Mike McShane said the agency is required to provide officials' security when ordered by the State Law Enforcement Division. DNR, along with Forestry, Parks, Recreation and Tourism and the Department of Health and Environmental Control, consumes about 1 percent of the state's \$5 billion budget, but provide for an estimated \$30-billion-plus per year in economic impact, McShane said.

The state is on the bottom tier in the nation for many of its services, but natural resources has been one area it has maintained well, helping attract industries such as Fuji and BMW, he said.

"We're not only at the edge of the precipice, I think some of us are hanging off," McShane said. "We can't do it any more. Who will?"

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