

Lab might not survive budget cuts

CDC facility studies infectious diseases

BY TREVOR HUGHES •

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Researchers at a federal lab in Fort Collins face a budget cut that could mean the loss of more than 100 jobs dedicated to fighting infectious diseases such as West Nile virus and yellow fever.

Colorado's Congressional delegation is mobilizing to shore up support for the Division of Vector-Borne Infectious Diseases, or DVBD, a Fort Collins-based lab that's part of the Atlanta-based federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. President Barack Obama's proposed fiscal 2011 budget cuts the lab's budget by more than 70 percent, from \$39 million to about \$12 million.

The labs are on land owned by Colorado State University at its Foothills Campus west of the city and employ about 258 people. Division director Lyle Petersen said the president's budget calls for a cut of at least \$7 million and possibly much more. He said it could also mean the loss of 100 jobs at state and county health departments around the country - positions currently funded by his division.

Karl Moeller, executive director at the Washington, D.C.-based Campaign for Public Health, said it's hard to estimate exactly how many jobs are at risk.

"The proposed cut is not 100 percent of the Fort Collins budget," he said. "Still, operating the lab with the proposed cut would be like driving a car with only two tires: possible in theory, but difficult in practice."

In a letter to Senate budget writers, Sens. Mark Udall and Michael Bennet said the DVBD budget cut would "severely compromise" public health. The lab researches vaccines and treatment for many infectious diseases.

"These efforts have saved lives in communities across the United States, and the DVBD's continued work puts our nation's public health community on strong footing to respond to future outbreaks and the unknown challenges they pose," Bennet and Udall wrote.

Congresswoman Betsy Markey wrote a similar letter to House budget writers, citing the lab's "enormous contributions to human life and safety."

Markey is planning to tour the lab next month as part of her lobbying efforts, which also included testifying before a budget committee, her staff said. Congress has an Oct. 1 deadline for approving the budget.

Moeller said public health research is often an easy target for budget cuts because it has no immediate impact. But eliminating research programs means the country would be less able to respond to outbreaks of West Nile or Dengue fever, he said.

"When a pandemic flu strikes but doesn't get a foothold because there's a vaccine available ... that means your vector-borne disease lab in Fort Collins is working," he said. "If you lay those folks off and they go to work for someone else, that institutional memory is gone. You can't just replace that."

