

Green groups decry sequester's effects

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Doug Mills/The New York Times

Weeks after President Obama promised to develop sustainable energy and green jobs and to fight climate change — first in his second Inaugural Address, and then in his State of the Union Message — the realities of American politics have set in.

The first \$85.3 billion in automatic federal budget cuts known as the sequester started taking effect on Friday.

Republicans accuse the president and his supporters of needlessly trying to scare the public by overstating the possible impacts of the budget cuts. And my colleague Michael Shear reports that so far, three days in, their impact has not been immediately felt. Environmentalists say that will not last.

President Obama has sought to highlight how the cuts could endanger thousands of defense-industry jobs, but others are warning that the reduced budget will take funds from renewable-energy programs, environmental protection, disaster relief, food and water inspections and scientific research.

Last month, Steven Chu, the secretary of energy, warned a U.S. Senate committee that sequestration would affect the push toward renewable energy (a pdf of the letter is on the Senate site).

"Under sequestration, funding reductions would decelerate the nation's transition into a clean energy economy, and could weaken efforts to become more energy independent and energy secure," he wrote.

He also warned that cuts to the Department of Energy's Office of Science would affect the work of 25,000 researchers and staff working in 10 laboratories across the country.

At the Environmental Protection Agency, some staffers will temporarily lose their job, as job furloughs lasting to the end of September are handed down.

Reuters reported on an email from the acting E.P.A. head, Bob Perciasepe, who told his employees that despite preparing for the sequester cuts, "furloughs are inevitable."

Among its other roles, the agency is to release new rules governing greenhouse gas emissions from new power plants.

The E.P.A. also warned that it would have to reduce the number of environmental inspections, enforcement of rules at Superfund sites (sites contaminated by hazardous substances), ground water cleanup actions and much more.

"The cuts we will mean fewer inspectors to keep toxins out of our food, fewer watchdogs to keep toxins out of the air we breathe and the water we drink, and more tax breaks for the billion-dollar companies that prefer to pollute with impunity to protect every penny of their record profits," said Michael Brune, the executive director of the Sierra Club, the American environmental group, in a statement.

Federal disaster relief will also see cuts under the sequester, with more than \$900 million being cut from Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA. The agency has been instrumental in the federal response to increasingly extreme weather events that are the result of a changing climate.

There's currently some debate on whether the sequester will slow the current rebuilding efforts in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

The National Park system stands to lose some \$110 million of federal funding.

"From Yellowstone to Cape Cod, the Grand Canyon and Great Smoky Mountains, our national heritage and local economies are at risk," wrote Tom Kiernan, president of the National Parks Conservation Association.

Hours will be reduced, visitors' centers will close and some rangers, educators, and personnel will lose their job, according to leaked documents obtained by the group.

"Make no mistake: The arbitrary, across-the-board cuts that will reduce our food inspections, lock gates at our national parks, dirty our drinking water and throw hundreds of thousands of Americans out of work are not because of Washington gridlock," said Franz Matzner, associate director of government affairs for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group. "They are the product of GOP obstructionists protecting loopholes for millionaires and subsidies for oil companies."

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