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Dnr Secretary Says That Layoffs May Be Necessary

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Ron Seely Environment reporter

Department of Natural Resources Secretary Scott Hassett said Monday it may be necessary to lay off employees in the agency to meet budget cuts ordered by Gov. Jim Doyle.

"I can't imagine that there won't be a few," said Hassett, who was recently appointed to the job by Doyle.

It would be the first layoffs in many years at the agency, which managed to avoid such a step during a massive reorganization in the late 1990s.

Hassett said Gov. Jim Doyle has ordered the DNR to cut 145 positions and that the end of several federal and project positions may increase that number to 170. It's unlikely, he said, that the reduction can be absorbed by simply not filling vacant positions.

"DNR has a long and admirable history of avoiding layoffs in times of downsizing," Hassett said in a memorandum to staff members last week. "I am in the very unenviable position of being secretary at a time when the budget situation is so serious, avoiding layoffs is a commitment DNR can no longer make, and that's why I'm sending you this message today."

While similar situations in the past have been handled by not filling open positions and by downsizing programs, Hassett said that doesn't appear possible this time because the cuts have been ordered in specific areas. Many departments are already cut to the bone, and are responsible for carrying out federally mandated regulatory environmental rules.

"We have to protect the integrity of the programs," Hassett said.

In addition, Hassett said in the memorandum that some programs will probably also be reduced simply because workloads would become too heavy, already a problem in the agency.

"The positions we cut now are not likely to be restored," Hassett wrote. "and we have to deal with that reality and acknowledge we are going to do less with less. Conversely, we have to preserve functions most critical to the agency mission. That means some activities must be ended to preserve the long-term effectiveness of DNR. I truly believe that every program in DNR has great value, but Wisconsin just cannot afford all of them anymore."

Hassett has asked each DNR division to prepare a formal work-force reduction plan. The plans will be used in early May, he said, to issue "at risk" notices to employees whose jobs may be cut in the two-year budget period that begins July 1.

He emphasized that the "at risk" notice is not a formal layoff notice, but instead

lets the worker know the job may be cut and starts the process of helping the worker find another job.

Hassett said he will know better in the next two weeks how many employees could lose their jobs.

The news comes at a difficult time for the agency as it struggles to fight chronic wasting disease, a fatal and contagious illness that has infected the wild deer herd.

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