

Floridians try to shield defense from budget cuts (Sun-Sentinel)

By William Gibson

South Florida Congressman Allen West and defense industry leaders in Florida hope to fend off budget cuts that they fear will severely squeeze contractors in the state who do \$14 billion worth of business.

Florida could lose as many as 40,000 defense-related jobs as a result, according to a report from the Aerospace Industries Association earlier this month.

The failure of a congressional supercommittee to agree on a debt-reduction plan will trigger an automatic \$600 billion cut in defense spending starting in 2013 unless Congress finds a way to avoid it. West, a Republican from Plantation and an Army veteran, hopes to use his seat on the Armed Services Committee as a bully pulpit to oppose further cuts.

"Now is not the time to gut our military," he said.

He said Congress will have to look for other ways to save money, such as closing tax loopholes, cutting duplicative programs and selling federal land.

At the least, the prospect of deep cuts "produces a lot of uncertainty," said Joe Marino, president of the Florida League of Defense Contractors.

"A lot of contractors are going to be saying, 'How do I keep my doors open, how do I survive? I've got this contract, but when do I get paid?'" he said.

The impact could hit the 196 contractors in Central Florida and 180 in South Florida.

Given these prospects, Marino said the industry plans to ask the state Legislature for tax breaks to make it more affordable to hire and retain defense workers in Florida.

From 2000 to 2010, Orange County led the state with \$30.7 billion of defense contracts. During those years, Palm Beach County had \$5.1 billion of defense business, Miami-Dade County \$3.9 billion and Broward County \$3.7 billion.