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Staff and program cuts possible for Kahoolawe

Online fundraising campaign started

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By MELISSA TANJI - Staff Writer (mtanji@mauinews.com) , The Maui News

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Laying off half of its staff and periodically closing the Kahoolawe base camp may be in the future for the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission.

Commission Executive Director Michael Naho'opi'i said he told his staff on May 15 that there could be layoffs well as a reduction in its operations around June 30, the ending of the current fiscal year.

The commission that manages the reserve is poised to receive from the state only about one-third of its annual budget this fiscal year, which begins July 1. Its operating budget is around \$2.8 million.

Naho'opi'i said the proposal to reduce staff and operations was suggested shortly after the state Legislature ended its session earlier this month and passed out a bill with the \$2 million in funding for the organization in the next two fiscal years, or \$1 million per each year. The bill is undergoing legal and policy review before it reaches Gov. David Ige's desk.

Naho'opi'i and his staff had to come up with a plan on what to do next, and pondered the questions: "What does this mean to us? How can we survive?"

"The key thing was we want the ability to have a presence on Maui," he said.

This includes keeping an office on Maui and minimal staff.

He added that a possible cut in staff and operations may be necessary to stay in operation in the long run.

"That's the only way were are going to survive," he said.

The budget-cutting proposals are not final.

Naho'opi'i will present the plans to the commission's board at a meeting scheduled for 10 a.m. June 1 in the Maui County Planning Department Conference room in the Kalana Pakui building.

Commission Chairwoman Michele Chouteau McLean said Naho'opi'i has run several scenarios before her, but she is not sure yet on what his final proposal will be.

"He is still working on what he's going to present to the commission," she said.

McLean said she knows there could be changes to personnel and operations.

"There is no doubt that KIRC won't be able to continue business as usual," she said.

Overall, McLean said she has a heavy heart for the staff members, if cuts need to be made.

"I'm looking out not just for the work that KIRC does . . . (but) on a personal level for the staff members. You never like having to tell folks they are not going to have a job. They are great people. All of them, every single one of them."



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She said job-saving ideas include some voluntary furloughs or cutting hours to part time.

In light of the funding issue and hearing about the possible layoffs, Naho'opi'i said his staff came up with a campaign to raise \$100,000 by June 15.

If \$100,000 is raised, KIRC will be able to maintain its volunteer trips to the island at least through the summer as well as finish up some grant work, which includes restoration projects along with a summer internship program.

"We need other funding to provide for the infrastructure so the grants can be accomplished," Naho'opi'i said.

The group has started an Internet "Go Fund Me" campaign called "Aloha Kaho'olawe 2015." As of early Thursday afternoon, around \$9,819 had been raised in six days. People are directed to a Go Fund Me campaign website where they can make a donation and view information about the KIRC cause and mission.

The website is at www.gofundme.com/alohakahoolawe2015.

"We have 30 days to raise the necessary funds to continue our volunteer and restoration programs through the summer; the lifeblood of our kuleana to restore life to Kaho'olawe," reads a line from the campaign website.

KIRC was established by the state Legislature in 1993 to manage the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve while it's held in trust for a future Native Hawaiian sovereign entity. The island, formerly used as a bombing target and practice area for the U.S. military, was turned over to the state in 1994.

Until now, the commission has drawn its funds from a \$44 million trust fund the federal government set up when it turned over the island. That fund is slated to run out of money by early next year.

Since 2009, members of the commission have lobbied state lawmakers for some sort of funding mechanism that would bolster the dwindling trust fund, but no legislation has passed.

Ige had proposed the \$2 million funding for the next two years. A House bill that would have appropriated additional funds for restoration and preservation projects died in conference committee. The commission has also been scaling back its use of funds in the last few years.

Naho'opi'i said the organization is pleased that it is poised to receive \$1million per year. "We are thankful we got one million," he said.

But he compared it to eating a "little cookie" and wanting more if you are hungry and not being satisfied.

Naho'opi'i said the campaign will also be a way to show lawmakers that there is community support for the work at Kahoolawe. People wanting to help have been calling Naho'opi'i since last week. But he needs more support.

"We need to send a message out. We need help," he said.

He called on people who have visited the island before to contribute so KIRC can continue to bring volunteers to work and learn about the island.

Since 1994, KIRC has supported the work of 10,000 volunteers.

Kelly McHugh, KIRC's public information specialist, said that if some work is postponed on the island it will be like taking a step back.

She noted that, with the island's rugged terrain and lack of rainfall, projects involving planting will suffer even if projects are delayed because some things need ongoing maintenance.

Naho'opi'i said that if KIRC were to close its base camp, then it might not be easy to re-establish. The base camp stores supplies, including food, and it has electric generators and other infrastructure.

"Normally, you don't turn off the electricity for a month at your house and come back and expect things to work," he said.

* Melissa Tanji can be reached at mtanji@mauinews.com.

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