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KIRC outlines plans for scaled-down operations

Kahoolawe group received only part of its requested funds for fiscal year

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By EILEEN CHAO - Staff Writer (echao@mauinews.com) , The Maui News

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WAILUKU - In an effort to cope with receiving only a third of its requested funds from the state Legislature, the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission expects to downsize its 18-member staff, with some taking pay cuts, others being reduced to part-time workers and two people losing their jobs.

Two positions will be cut starting in August, according to the 2016 fiscal year budget that the commission unanimously passed Monday. One person is expected to retire, two staff members would be reduced to part-time employees and three staff members are expected to be retained through grant funding.

Ten employees, mostly in administrative positions, will remain on the payroll, though they will take 5 percent cuts in pay.

The commission also may close its base camp at Honokanaia for two weeks every month, beginning in August, as a cost-cutting measure.

"We had to look at it and make some tough decisions on how to make this thing work," said KIRC Executive Director Michael Naho'opi'i. "We still don't have all the answers. This (budget) proposal is our best guess at what we think we could do, and it still has a lot of floating pieces where we don't have guarantees."

The commission had hoped to secure at least \$3 million from the state Legislature for the upcoming fiscal year that begins July 1, but lawmakers approved only \$1 million last session. The bill awaits a signature from Gov. David Ige.

More than half of the \$1 million appropriation will go toward the salaries of the 10 full-time staff members, according to the budget passed Monday. Another \$84,000 will go toward current lease payments, and \$383,965 has been earmarked for "other current expenses," which includes outreach materials, software maintenance, fuel, travel expenses, training and other programs.

Last year, the commission approved a \$2.8 million budget, which was already significantly less than the \$6.8 million budget passed five years ago, Naho'opi'i said.

"I already thought \$2.8 (million) is the lowest we could've gone without a significant change in the way we did things," Naho'opi'i said.

The commission is up against a wall because its \$44 million trust fund, which was set up in 1994, has all but run dry. Administrators estimate the current balance to be around \$400,000.

KIRC ocean resource specialist Jennifer Vander Veur, one of the two people who will be losing their jobs in August, expressed concern that cutting positions would take a toll on the remaining staff.

"If the objective is to restore the island and to maintain the function of restoring the island, keeping field staff is critical to that," Vander Veur said. "You're not going to be able to do what we do without the field staff that we have," she said, adding that workers are already "stretched thin," often doing the work of two or three people.

"We've had so much positive momentum. We've been doing so many good things. It's really hard to see this happening at this moment," Vander Veur said tearfully.

Commission Chairwoman Michele Chouteau McLean was sad to have to cut staff, acknowledging that restoration efforts on Kahoolawe may suffer going forward.



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"It's not just the positions. It's the work that they do," McLean said. "We're always looking to do the best we can with the resources we have and make the biggest impact we can, but this will definitely have an impact on those things. There will be setbacks."

She said she's hopeful that unexpected funding from the Office of Hawaiian Affairs or another entity would help keep staff positions. Naho'opi'i told commissioners Monday that he had submitted a request for a \$300,000 grant from OHA.

McLean said that OHA Maui Trustee Carmen Hulu Lindsey, who was recently appointed to KIRC as the OHA representative, seemed "very engaged in seeing what kind of support OHA might be able to provide."

KIRC staff member Kui Gapero urged commissioners to get involved, not just in monthly meetings but by participating in KIRC events or volunteering to do on-island restoration work.

Kamehameha School student Lily Gavagan, 15, suggested that the commission solicit help from groups, like her school or the Bishop Estate, which are invested in "keeping Hawaiian culture alive." She echoed concerns brought up by other testifiers about "fighting" or "butting heads" between members of KIRC and the Protect Kaho'olawe Ohana.

"We should work together. It's not going to help if we keep fighting. It's just going to make more trouble," said Gavagan, whose mother works for the commission.

KIRC started an Internet "Go Fund Me" campaign last month called "Aloha Kaho'olawe 2015." As of Monday afternoon, the fund had raised \$24,131 of its \$100,000 target. Those donations came from 231 people in 17 days. To donate, visit www.gofundme.com/alohakahoolawe2015.

"We'll still survive. We've survived over the years, and the challenges of Kaho'olawe are always there," Naho'opi'i said. "This is what we came up with to try to overcome those challenges and persevere for at least another day."

Naho'opi'i said that he would be working with the commission to request additional state funds during the next legislative session, which begins in January.

Commissioners unanimously passed the budget for the next fiscal year Monday, acknowledging that the commission can revise the budget at its next meeting in July.

Monday marked the first KIRC meeting for commissioners Lindsey and Suzanne Case, the recently appointed chairwoman of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources.

* Eileen Chao can be reached at echao@mauinews.com.

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