

Cavalier base closure worries residents

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CAVALIER, N.D. — The uncertain future of the Cavalier Air Force Station has cast a shadow over the economy of northeastern North Dakota.

The concrete monolith rises out of the wheat fields, its enormous eye alert to hostile missiles and space particles. For 17 years it has provided high-paying jobs as a declining farm economy has decimated communities nearby.

It could all come to an end this fall, if the Air Force proceeds with the shutdown it announced last month. The closure is expected to shave \$8 million from the nation's defense budget.

In Cavalier, where 24 will lose their jobs, most people think the choice is political.

"We don't have the votes some other states do," Mayor Webb Voorhees says. "I know that everybody's for the economy, for cutting back. I suppose we need to in the name of efficiency. But rural areas are the ones that get hurt."

There would be jobs elsewhere for the 27 military personnel and six Department of Defense civilians. But 102 contract employees in 15 small towns would have nothing to fall back on.

"The base closure is like having somebody in your family killed in a car accident," says Mayor Pat Hardy of Walhalla, where 32 face unemployment. "You read about it in the paper every day. But when it happens to you it's devastating."

Every job counts in a town of 1,141 people. It could mean half a dozen vacant homes. And in Walhalla that constitutes a glut.

"It's pretty abrupt when they call up and say, 'Two weeks from now we're shutting radar off,'" says Hardy. "Of course, it's been longer than two weeks now. But still there's that cloud hanging over tomorrow or the next day. When you've got kids and house payments and car payments and you're trying to make a living, how do you all of a sudden go day to day?"

The scenario is worse in Mountain: In the Icelandic community of 44 households, nine families may lose their sole means of support.

Of a dozen customers in the Mountain Chalet Cafe, more than half work at the radar station, about eight miles north.

Most say they cannot talk about the closure because their jobs are top secret. The truth is that they don't have a clue to whether those jobs will end — or when.

"They're strung along not knowing whether they're going to be employed beyond October 1st," schoolteacher Loretta Bernhoft says.

Says small grain farmer Michael Kotchman, whose wife works at the radar station, "They're the highest paying jobs in the area, and there are no other jobs to pick up the slack."

And there are more than jobs at stake.

"The Air Force has been a good neighbor," Kotchman says. "They send their fire trucks out when there is an emergency. And the University of North Dakota-Lake Region offers college courses for everybody in the community."

Its recreation center, also open to the public, has racquetball courts, a bowling alley and fitness center — amenities people would otherwise drive 50 miles or more to enjoy.

Employment prospects are somewhat brighter in Walhalla, where a Canadian truck box manufacturer is building a plant that will mean 10 new jobs at first and eventually up to 40.

The mayor says the base closure was bound to happen sometime.

"From the time it was built, people realized it could close at any time," he says. "We figured as long as it stayed here it was kind of a gift."