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State prepares for looming defense cuts with report that argues for more Pentagon spending

ADAM ASHTON

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Washington’s congressional delegation released a report Tuesday that makes a case for steady or increased military spending in the state even as the Pentagon eyes budget cuts across the services.

Gov. Chris Gregoire got into the spirit of the occasion by asking the Legislature to spend nearly $13 million to fulfill some ideas laid out in the report.

Gregoire pointed to the threat of future base closings, saying it is “time for us to step up responsibly in advance.” She called the defense presence in Washington “vitally important to our future.”

The 132-page report, created by the Washington Military Alliance, outlines more than $13 billion that the Defense Department spends at military installations from Joint Base Lewis-McChord and Naval Base Kitsap in the Puget Sound to Fairchild Air Force Base in Eastern Washington.

It contends those resources should be maintained, even as U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan winds down, because they support the Pentagon’s recent emphasis on Pacific threats and defense of cyber networks.

The report also calls on civilian governments in the state to take steps that would make them more attractive to the military should the Pentagon undertake an unexpected round of Base Closure and Realignment Commission hearings in 2014 or 2015.

It also proposes that a civilian director of military affairs be appointed to improve communication between civilian agencies and defense installations.

Gregoire budgeted $300,000 for the report following an August meeting among lawmakers, her office and representatives from cities near the state’s military bases.

In her budget proposal released Tuesday, the governor embraced three of the alliance’s recommendations. She called on the Legislature to fund a new state director of military affairs, pay for competitive grants addressing military communities’ needs and provide capital funds for two proposed elementary schools in the Clover Park School District, which serves Lewis-McChord.

The government-relations firm Denny Miller Associates out of Washington, D.C., wrote the report.

Among its recommendations:

• Calling on community-support groups to apply for grants that would enable them to provide special services near military installations.

• Paying attention to quality-of-life issues at the state’s military bases, such as by setting aside money for schools or advancing projects that would improve the installations. Examples of the latter include wastewater-treatment upgrades and transportation fixes.

• Encouraging representatives of civilian agencies and military installations to meet with each other.

• Amending the state Public Records Act to exempt sensitive military information if it relates to specific bases.

Other states with a lot to lose are commissioning similar reports as they foresee decreased defense spending. South Carolina, for example, created a state military task force in April for the same purpose.

Seven Democratic lawmakers announced Washington report’s completion Tuesday and thanked Gregoire for organizing it.

U.S. Rep. Adam Smith, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said he doesn’t see a round of base closures in the immediate future, but said the military is making many smaller decisions as it reduces its ranks. The new report could help lawmakers find places where Washington state’s interests match the Pentagon’s priorities, said Smith, of Bellevue and formerly of Tacoma.

The Pentagon plans to cut $487 billion of spending over the next 10 years while reducing the size of the Army and Marines. But military and civilian leaders in Washington state have said they expect Lewis-McChord will remain about the same size because of the Pentagon’s stated goals of focusing on the Pacific region.

*Adam Ashton: 253-597-8646**adam.ashton@thenewstribune.com*[*blog.thenewstribune.com/military*](http://blog.thenewstribune.com/military) *TNTmilitary*

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