

Nekoma, ND (AP) - Work is progressing on the shutdown of the nation's only antiballistic missile defense site, located in northeastern North Dakota.

The defense appropriations bill signed by President Ford last month called for the Missile Site Radar (MSR) to be shut down, the Sprint and Spartan missiles at the 100 launchers located at the four remote launching facilities and at the MSR to be deactivated and the staff at the MSR to be eliminated, all by October 1.

The Perimeter Acquisition Radar is scheduled to continue, although its role will change. Rather than an ABM defense operation, it will become part of the nation's missile attack warning and assessment system.

Staff reductions at the site have already begun. When the ABM site went fully operational in October, it was staffed by 447 military personnel, 135 government civilians and some 1,200 contractor employees.

By October 1, military personnel are scheduled to be cut to 25, while government and contractor staffs are set to be about 27 and 490, respectively.

Some of the military personnel at the MSR site at Nekoma have already left, assigned to duties elsewhere.

Those remaining are sorting through equipment and supplies, deciding what must be retained for the PAR operation and what will be turned back into the supply channels.

"Work has begun on removing the missile components," said Glen Robertson, public affairs officer at the site. "It will be done by October 1 and it may be done much in advance to that."

He said the missile components will be shipped to other defense installations for storage. However, the ultimate fate of the silos is still not known. Robertson said members of the international negotiating committee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have already visited the MSR and remote facilities "to look at the facilities to enable them to better be able to do whatever they're going to do."

Robertson said it was not known what will become of the buildings at the MSR site.

Among options under investigation are reuse of the radar and computer system for weather modification purposes, but the costs of reprogramming the system and maintaining it are likely to be large.

Other considerations for the site are reuse of the facilities for a malting plant, a pasta plant or possibly using the missile silos for grain storage.

Also being considered is using the site as a vocational-educational school complex.

When the last traces of the ABM are gone, populations of the area towns will shrink.

Most communities have yet to feel the real crunch of the loss of the ABM, partly because the ABM is being phased out gradually and also because of the presence of Boeing Co., employees. Boeing is conducting a program to modify the Minuteman missile system in the area, the same missiles the ABM was designed to protect.

Currently, Boeing is using about 1,000 employees on the revamping project.

But when the work is done and the ABM is shut down in October, officials will have to face changes.

"We don't know the big picture yet," explained John MacFarlane, mayor of Langdon, a town which will probably feel the biggest effect from the ABM's departure. "We don't know the answer. We have to try to get something that will create jobs. But that's pretty hard to do."

However, MacFarlane is optimistic.

"I can tell you one thing," he said. "Langdon is not going to dry up and go away. We were here before ABM came here and we'll be here when they go."

Before ABM arrived, Langdon's population was 2,180 and a special census taken in 1971 showed 3,925. Most officials figure the town's population peaked in 1974 at about 4,500.

When ABM pulls out, Langdon is likely to lose about 1,000 persons, according to estimates.

The situation is the same throughout the area with an estimated 200 persons leaving Nekoma when the ABM shuts down. Edmore and Adams are other communities facing population losses.

"We know right now that the site generates \$35 million in salaries and site goods and services annually," MacFarlane said. "Now, how much of that ends up in Langdon, we don't know."

Most businessmen expect at least a 25 percent to 35 percent drop in sales.

Teachers throughout the area face layoffs and city governments will feel the pinch as revenue incomes drop.

The communities, however, have benefitted from ABM. It meant impact funds to improve quality of life.

City officials throughout the area say they are well aware ABM has paid its way. Now, they say they will have to adjust to an ABM-less economy.