

Fla.'s Space Coast feels pain of shuttle's end

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(AP) -- Workers at the Kennedy Space Center always knew the end of the shuttle program would bring hard times to Florida's Space Coast.

They just couldn't predict how much pain.

Some 7,000 jobs are being cut, and potential replacement positions evaporated last year when President [Barack Obama](#) scrapped plans to return astronauts to the moon.

Soon-to-be-jobless space workers and those who've already lost their jobs are now competing for work in a labor market where more than one in 10 is unemployed.

And the Space Coast is still reeling from the housing crisis, making it tougher for workers to sell their homes and move elsewhere for a job.

"Everything is taking a turn for the worst, it seems like," said Kevin Smith, local president of the union for space center firefighters, paramedics and workers at [emergency landing](#) sites. "What little is out there, everybody is competing for."

The Space Coast has faced dire times before: There was a gap between the end of NASA's [Apollo program](#) in the mid-1970s and the first [shuttle launch](#) in 1981. But at least space workers and businesses had the [shuttle](#) to look forward to at the end of the six-year hiatus.

No such program exists for workers like engineer Tony Crisafulli, who

will be laid off two days after Atlantis returns from the last [shuttle mission](#) in July.

"We're all out here working, knowing that we're losing our jobs in a few days," said Crisafulli, who has been at the space center for nearly 23 years.

Space workers had been looking to the Constellation moon program to cushion the blow from the shuttle program's end. The cancellation of that project eliminated 2,000 jobs.

"We were all counting on that to take us through the transition," Crisafulli said. "At least, that was something."

The Obama administration's space plan has NASA building a new capsule and giant rocket to take astronauts to an asteroid, and eventually Mars. It relies on private companies to build their own spacecraft to fly cargo and [astronauts](#) to the International Space Station.

The local jobs agency estimates that [NASA](#) infuses \$1.2 billion into Florida's economy, and that two jobs are lost for each aerospace job that is eliminated.

At the height of the shuttle program, [Kennedy Space Center](#) had 17,000 employees who mostly worked for private contractors. After the shuttles retire, there will be a little over 8,500. They'll wrap up the [shuttle program](#) and prepare the orbiters for museums, work on unmanned launches and develop and test the new space capsule.

The space program has a hold on the area that goes beyond jobs and strikes at the identity of this region stretching along Florida's central Atlantic Coast. This was a sleepy coastal area known for citrus and resort hotels before it was picked in the late 1950s to be the site for the United

States' blasts into the space age.

With the launches of Saturn rockets, the communities of Titusville, Cape Canaveral, Merritt Island and Cocoa Beach gained an influx of highly educated engineers, project managers and technicians, and aerospace became the Space Coast's dominant industry.

Even the area code is 3-2-1. Elementary schools are named for the shuttles and there's Astronaut High School and Satellite High School. Locals ate at the Moon Hut restaurant before it closed, and visitors can sleep in a bed shaped like a space shuttle at the Best Western Space Shuttle Inn in Titusville.

Restaurants and businesses already are feeling the belt-tightening as residents stay home to save money. After July, it will be a long while before hotels are booked up like they usually are for shuttle launches. Hundreds of thousands of spectators pour into Brevard County, which ordinarily is home to a half million residents.

"Everyone is starting to feel the pinch. People are not working. They're economizing," said Donna Thrash, who runs a jobs workshop for space workers at Brevard Workforce, the county's career center. "Every launch, this area is full of people and everyone benefits from that. Once that's gone, it's going to really hit people that that isn't coming anymore."

The Space Coast had years to prepare for the end of the space shuttle. But the announcement in 2004 occurred in a different era - a time when Florida's unemployment rate was 3.5 percent, the housing boom was fueling construction growth and the Space Coast had the highest property values in central Florida. Now, unemployment is at 10.6 percent, growth has disappeared and for-sale signs dot neighborhoods.

"The number of folks who have found other work is negligible. You

almost have to leave the area to find other work," said Lew Jamieson, local president of the union for workers who provide support for shuttle launches

The aerospace jobs that would be natural fits for the laid-off space workers are in places like South Carolina, Oklahoma and the Pacific Northwest. The Boeing Co. and other aerospace companies with workers at the space center are hiring some of their shuttle workers at airplane factories.

"We don't need rocket scientists to build commercial aircraft but we need smart people," said Stephen Davis, a Boeing spokesman.

But those jobs only number in the dozens, possibly hundreds at best. And even if space workers get hired out of state, they would have to sell their homes in the worst housing collapse in decades. The median value of a home in Cape Canaveral, the nearest city to the space center, went from under \$250,000 in 2007 to around \$110,000 in May, according to the real estate website Zillow.

Aerospace technician Giovanni Pinzon said moving would be hard for workers like him who are established in the area with a family and home.

"I'd consider leaving the state but that would be a last option. I haven't ruled it out completely," said Pinzon, 47, who also will be pink-slipped two days after the final shuttle lands.

Raymond Steele has been struggling since he lost his job as a logistics engineer for the scrapped [moon program](#) and his marriage collapsed. But the 57-year-old is more worried about the future of the [Space Coast](#) that he still calls home.

"There is just a huge ripple effect," said Steele. "It's not just one aerospace engineer like me who gets laid off. There are wives, children, schools, restaurants. It comes down to not just jobs but communities."

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