

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

On the Nomination of Steven H. Murdock to be
Director of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
December 18, 2007

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When federal marshals rode through northern Maine during the first federal census in 1790, my native county of Aroostook hadn't been established, and its few inhabitants had little contact with federal officials, much less federal programs. Today, Aroostook County, like every other part of our country, is directly affected by the many uses of data collected by the Census Bureau.

Dr. Steven Murdock, the President's nominee to be the next Census Director, has wide-ranging and relevant experience: state demographer of Texas,

professor, data-center director, and consultant. He will need that experience as well as determination and managerial skill to tackle the challenges facing the Bureau.

Many of these challenges have been detailed in reports by the Government Accountability Office and other experts.

In 2004, for example, the National Research Council issued a report from its Panel on Future Census Methods. That panel endorsed the Bureau's overall plans for 2010, but warned of "unique risks and challenges" to be overcome on a tight schedule – highlighting the use of new technology.

The panel recommended, among other things, that the Census Bureau seek funding well in advance

of need, exercise better management of project risks, and promote use of the Internet.

A 2004 report by the Inspector General of the Department of Commerce raised similar concerns and took note of a “late start” on setting up an effective project-management structure.

It is disappointing, to say the least, that GAO’s recent review of preparations for the 2010 Census finds that these problems persist.

For example, the handheld computing devices that will be used to record and transmit data for the 2010 Census are a concern. GAO staff observed field tests this spring and noted “a number of performance issues ... such as slow and inconsistent data processing.” One Census employee’s handheld device took two hours to verify 16 addresses at one

location in North Carolina. The Census Bureau must ensure that these handheld devices work properly to avoid a massive and urgent reversion to paper forms.

The GAO has noted the Bureau is making “extensive use of contractors” in its preparations for the 2010 Census. This Committee is well versed in the contracting process, having investigated costly debacles in both domestic and foreign operations and having approved reform legislation.

Add to these issues the ever-present problems of over- and under-counting, and it is evident that the next Census Director will have his hands full.

Finally, consider a matter of unexploited potential: the Internet. Last year, Senator Coburn conducted a subcommittee hearing on census costs

and technology use. He noted that while Canada, Australia and other countries collect census data via the Internet, and while Americans can use it to file taxes, the U.S. Census Bureau decided not to develop an Internet option for 2010. I look forward to hearing the nominee's views on this matter.

The calendar continues its relentless progress toward April 2010, leaving the Census Bureau with limited time and capacity to make major changes in the process. I look forward to exploring the nominee's thoughts on key challenges and his recommendations for addressing them.

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