

*Opening Statement of Sen. Tom Coburn
Census in Peril: Getting the 2010 Decennial Back on Track, Part II
April 15, 2008*

I would like to thank Chairman Lieberman and Ranking Member Collins for calling this hearing, the second hearing that the committee has held in recent months, to discuss the 2010 Census.

In June 2006, the federal financial management subcommittee held a hearing titled: *2010 Census, Off-Line and Off-Budget – the High Cost of Low Tech Counting*. That was three billion dollars ago and before the handheld computers were scrapped. We now know that things were far worse than this Committee was ever led to believe.

It has become apparent in recent weeks that the Census Bureau and the Department of Commerce should have known about these problems long ago, but failed to act. Worse yet, they ignored the problems. Even as auditors from the Government Accountability Office sat in this room and explained to this committee in great detail about the problems facing the 2010 Census, the Bureau sat next to them at the table testifying that everything was on track. Somehow the problems were ignored again when the MITRE Corporation – hired by the Bureau for its ability to give frank advice – warned the agency a year ago that problems with the handheld computer contract were threatening the entire 2010 census.

The consequences will, as usual, be laid at the feet of those who had nothing to do creating the problem in the first place – taxpayers. This is exactly what happened in 1999 when Congress decided to increase spending for the 2000 Census by \$2.8 billion more than it originally planned. Instead of cutting funding someplace else it simply declared that the additional amount was “emergency spending.” This provided a convenient way to bust through the spending caps and avoid any budget cuts. At the time, I tried to prevent that increase by offering an amendment on the floor that would force budget cuts instead of new spending – the amendment had bipartisan support but ultimately lost.

This time is shaping up to be no different. Taxpayers will get stuck with the bill for the most expensive census of all time, which will be nearly \$15 billion even after inflation is factored in. Some in Congress again want to take the well-worn path of paying for these problems through more “emergency” deficit spending rather than to cut the funds of programs with bloated budgets. Every single Member of Congress who supports paying for these outrageous cost increases and reduced deliverables by charging it to our grandkids should be ashamed of themselves for punishing taxpayers this way.

The following few examples highlight exactly why Americans should be outraged by the price tag of the next census:

- First, the estimated value of the contract awarded to the Harris Corporation has ballooned from \$600 million to \$1.3 billion, even though the handheld computer will have only half of the functionality originally planned;
- Second, the cost of the handheld computer has increased from about \$400 per unit to upwards of \$600 per unit, according to the Commerce Department, for a mapping function that could easily be performed on a \$150 Blackberry; and

- Third, the Census Bureau has contracted for help desk services for enumerators in the field, but the cost has increased from \$36 million to \$217 million, seemingly overnight.

On top of the spending problems we face, the Director of the Census has also told us that the quality of the census could be lower than it was in 2000. This has a direct impact on the Bureau's constitutional duty to apportion the House of Representatives. Even after the 2000 Census, which was billed as the most accurate census ever, there was significant controversy about whether Utah should have been given an additional seat. I fear what may result from a less accurate census in 2010.

Admittedly, the picture I've just painted is bleak. There is no good way to put a positive spin on this situation and I don't believe that the American people are looking for excuses. I have serious questions about the decision to abandon the handheld computers for non-response follow up. And I hope to receive some more of the detailed justification for that decision at this hearing. Regardless, the decision has been made and we need to ensure that the plan for moving forward is a sound one. I want to thank the witnesses for being with us today and look forward to their testimony.