

Opening Statement

The committee will come to order.

My thanks to our witnesses – Secretary Gutierrez, Director Murdock, and our two witnesses from GAO – for being here on such short notice. Your cooperation with our oversight efforts and your commitment to working with us to get the 2010 decennial census back on track are greatly appreciated.

My thanks as well to Senator Lieberman and Senator Collins for allowing us to hold this hearing at the full committee.

As my colleagues are aware, the Constitution requires the federal government to go out every ten years and conduct a census. The data collected as a result of these efforts is used to support and ensure the effective operation of a number of programs here at the federal level and in the states as well.

The data is also used to determine the make up of the federal government itself. The information the Census Bureau collects about people and their communities once a decade is used to decide how the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are divided up.

Senator Coburn and I called this hearing because information we've learned from the Commerce Department, the Census Bureau, and in the press indicates that the 2010 decennial census could be at risk of failure.

Right now, the Census Bureau is supposed to be in the middle of a period it calls the "dress rehearsal." During the dress rehearsal, all of the procedures and technology that will be used in 2010 are supposed to be tested so that adjustments can be made before the counting actually begins. Instead of being out in the field doing a final run through, however, it appears that Census staff is stuck in headquarters trying to salvage a project that for years had been billed as the cornerstone of the Bureau's 2010 efforts.

The project – called "Field Data Collection Automation" – involves handheld computers that canvassers and census-takers will use to go into communities and collect information. It was supposed to lead to a better quality census than the largely paper-based efforts conducted in 2000 and in previous decennials. It was also supposed to be the key to the Census Bureau's projected cost savings this time around since using handheld computers instead of paper would likely mean fewer staff and less office space.

However, Commerce and Census officials decided very recently – about a decade after preparations for the 2010 decennial began – that the handheld project may not be viable. As we will hear from Secretary Gutierrez and Director Murdock today, Census staff is working now to come up with a series of options for how to conduct major portions of the 2010 count. Among those options, I assume, will be a complete abandonment of the handheld project and the return to a paper census. It is my understanding that all of the options on the table at this point will come with a hefty price tag.

I am, of course, very disappointed in this outcome. My disappointment comes not so much from the fact that the Census Bureau has tried and, in all likelihood, failed to use technology to improve the decennial census. It comes because we could wind up paying more for a poorer quality census in 2010 because the Census Bureau did not heed the warnings coming from GAO and others that their handheld project was troubled.

The subcommittee that Senator Coburn and I lead has held a number of hearings over the years on preparations for 2010. At all of those hearings – and also at some hearings held by our counterparts in the House - we heard warnings that the handheld project was not where it should be. GAO witnesses testified that, years into the contract with the handheld maker, the Harris Corporation, the Census Bureau had not finalized what they wanted done and when they wanted it completed.

GAO's findings were supported recently by the MITRE (*pronounced Might-er*) Corporation, an outside group hired by the Census Bureau to examine the contract with Harris. MITRE briefed top Census officials on two occasions – once in June and once in November – that the handheld project may not achieve the goals the Census Bureau initially had for it. MITRE even suggested that the entire project might need to be scrapped.

My goal in holding this hearing and airing these problems is not to point fingers and raise alarm bells. I want to find out what needs to be done to ensure that we live up to our constitutional obligation to conduct a quality 2010 decennial. And, while it may become necessary at some point to pay what we need to pay to get the census right, I want to make sure that we're doing all we can to control costs.

So I applaud you, Mr. Secretary, for involving yourself personally in the process currently underway and for seeking the advice and counsel of outside experts as you prepare to make a decision on how to move forward.

My thanks to you again for coming here on such short notice and for being as open with us as you have been since you realized that you had this problem on your hands.

Senator Coburn.