

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**Census in Peril:
Getting the 2010 Decennial
Back on Track**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

March 5, 2008

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Since 1790, any American with faith in the Constitution could predict that a Census would occur in 2010. This constitutionally mandated function of the federal government is nearly as ironclad a certainty as death and taxes.

As we approach the final stages of preparations for the 2010 Census, however, we face a large and alarming *uncertainty* about whether our nation will be able to rely on the results on the 2010 Census – whether for apportionment of representation in the U.S. House of Representatives, as required by the Constitution, or for

the myriad other federal programs that rely on accurate Census data in their operations.

Given the importance of the Census, we must also examine the information-technology failures that have placed the 2010 Census on such an uneasy foundation. Developing and deploying a customized technology against a fixed deadline demand extra diligence and energy in defining requirements, negotiating contracts, overseeing progress, and devising contingency plans. Here there is little to applaud and much to be concerned about the efforts of the Census Bureau.

This Committee is unfortunately no stranger to tales of federal projects and contracts that have gone awry, often at a heavy cost in taxpayer funds. Quite often, these failed projects have involved efforts to improve the government's use of information technology. Far too often, the results of these projects seem to follow a similar pattern - inadequately defined initial requirements, an increase in requirements to address both old and new operational challenges, substantial cost

increases that squeeze program budgets, inability or unwillingness of management to control “requirements creep” or cost overruns, and, finally, a decision to end an acquisition process with no deliverables or to accept a system that doesn’t meet expectations.

The 2010 Census is notable among projects that have drawn our attention, not only because of its great scope and expense, but because of its history of unheeded cautions.

I won’t belabor the points made in our Committee’s recent hearings, news stories, and Government Accountability Office reports. The salient fact is that years before the 2010 Census, warnings of potential dangers came from experts sought out by the Census Bureau itself and from the Commerce Department’s own Inspector General.

In 2004, the National Research Council’s Panel on Future Census Methods cautioned that “unique risks and challenges” attended the plan to develop a new data-collection and transmission technology on the tight

schedule for the next Census. Then in 2005, the Commerce Inspector General echoed the panel's concerns and noted a "late start" on imposing effective project-management methods.

It now appears that some combination of wishful thinking, lax management, and tunnel vision have brought us to a point at which the new Field Data Collection Acquisition or FDCA technology for handheld devices may not be ready for full service in April 2010.

The implications appear in the Census Bureau's budget request for Fiscal Year 2009. The Bureau has already requested more than *a billion dollars* above the FY 2008 funding level, but has told Committee staff that because revisions to the FDCA contract with Harris Corporation are incomplete, they could not estimate the future costs of the 2010 Census. And some estimates claim *an additional billion dollars or more* might be required to effectively complete this constitutional requirement.

In other words, it appears that we cannot exclude the possibility of going into the 2010 Census with a hastily devised and obscenely expensive reversion to paper-based data collection to handle data from people who do not return the mailed forms or who otherwise require a follow-up visit.

If the recent briefing summary prepared by MITRE Corporation – a Census Bureau consultant – is correct in saying that “immediate, significant changes are required to rescue the program” and that “money cannot trump time remaining,” then the Census Bureau and the country face a very serious problem.

I look to all the witnesses today to describe with complete candor on what the outlook for the 2010 Census really is, what steps you have taken or plan to take to improve that outlook, and what, in your judgment, should have been done differently.

I commend Senator Carper and Senator Coburn for the leadership they have shown in aggressively monitoring the challenges facing the 2010 Census and

the close attention they have paid to “at risk” information technology procurements government-wide. Those Senators presided over a 2006 hearing that sounded a clear alarm bell for federal information-technology projects in general, citing a GAO finding that up to \$12 billion of the \$64 billion requested for more than 850 IT projects in FY 2007 might be wasted – including the Census Bureau’s FDCA project. The current problems with the 2010 Census illustrate the pertinence of that warning.

I sincerely hope that today’s hearing will produce some solid answers to the concerns that Chairman Lieberman, Senators Carper and Coburn, and I raised in our February 22 letter to the Secretary of Commerce. Time is too short for us to accept anything less.

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