

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** The Honorable Carlos M. Gutierrez,  
Secretary of Commerce

**From:** John H. Thompson

**Date:** March 17, 2008

**Topic:** Recommendation on Census 2010 Field Data Collection Automation Alternatives

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Mr. Secretary, I have carefully considered the material presented and discussed at the March 14, 2008 meeting convened at the Census Bureau. The discussion of alternatives for conducting the 2010 Decennial Census given the issues that have arisen with the Field Data Collection Automation (FDCA) contract was very thorough. I have also reviewed the excellent briefing materials organized by your staff.

At this point, I must recommend that you consider Alternative 2 of the Barron Report. Under this alternative, the Harris Company will continue with the automated address canvassing using the handheld devices. The Harris Company will also develop the Operational Control System (OCS) for all paper based operations including (now) non-response follow-up. The Census Bureau will develop plans for a paper based non-response follow-up and will provide the Regional Census Center infrastructure.

I understand that the above recommendation is a dramatic and costly departure from the previous "baseline" plan under which handheld devices incorporating GPS and wireless technology were to be used for non-response follow-up (NRFU). However, at this point, I do not think that it would be prudent to put the decennial census at such a high risk of failure. I do not believe, given the current situation, that the baseline plan can be accomplished. This is a very painful recommendation for me to make, as this will be the first census in quite a while that does not demonstrate leadership in innovation.

Briefly, the basis for my assessment and recommendation is as follows:

1. The development of an automated system incorporating handhelds appears to be significantly delayed. Indeed, at this late date generating over 400 new requirements or corrections/clarifications to the FDCA contract is very disturbing. There is no fall-back or contingency should these devices not perform. It takes a significant lead time to prepare for a paper based alternative. For example, procedures must be developed, large volumes of paper questionnaires must be printed to the exacting specifications required for optical scanning, and the local office space necessary to house the increased volume of materials must be acquired. I do not believe that the time exists for first the development and testing necessary to be fully confident that the handheld devices will function properly; and to then put a contingency plan into action if they fail. This level of uncertainty and risk is unacceptable for a national endeavor such as the decennial census.

2. I considered a “dual-track” approach but rejected it. The greatest impact of such a scenario would dilute the key staff resources needed to carry out important census preparatory functions. I believe that the staff currently at the Census Bureau are already stretched very thin, and a dual track approach would result in such a diversion of resources as to put both tracks at unacceptable risk.
3. The paper based NRFU provides a greater level of contingency to address unforeseen problems (which are associated with every census). This alternative allows the Census Bureau to apply its core strengths at risk mitigation should the need arise. The Census Bureau has always been able to recruit and train the levels of staff necessary for any action. One of the greatest abilities of the Regional Census staff is to successfully “throw bodies” at a problem and find solutions to difficult problems. This strategy will not be available should handhelds fail. Each census has had some significant unanticipated situations arise, and this census will certainly be no different. Given the current circumstances, it is extremely unlikely that the Census Bureau in conjunction with the Harris Company will be able to engineer in the contingencies necessary to provide the robustness required.
4. In my experience both at the Census Bureau and in private industry, complicated contractual Information Technology projects can be accomplished when both contractor and sponsoring entity have a close working and mutually supportive relationship. It seemed clear to me that the current leadership of both the Census Bureau and the Harris Company do not have such a relationship. Indeed, the current state of the relationship as demonstrated at our briefing is such that achieving success on such a complicated project is extremely unlikely. I would be happy to discuss this in more depth with you, if desirable.

Going forward, it will be important to recognize and avoid the problems that have placed the 2010 Census in such a position. While it is hard to hone in on such casual effects from a distance it seems clear that there are issues with timely decision making, and in having staff with appropriate skills in key positions. I believe that it will be essential to establish processes at the Census Bureau that allow for timely and well thought out decision making. Staffing key decennial management positions is critical. The current management structure should be carefully examined to determine if efficiencies can be found that would permit a wider spread of experienced staff, and appropriate measures should be put in place to encourage former staff to return. In addition, it seems clear that an infusion of competent external hires is needed.

Clearly the accuracy of the 2010 Census is of paramount importance. Achieving accuracy levels commensurate with other modern censuses will be a challenge. The paper based alternative is expected to reduce the mail response rate by about 5 percentage points, increasing the NRFU workload by over 16 percent from the current plan. I mention this because historically, data from mail respondents is more accurate than from non-responders. In addition, the time frame is very tight to allow for the careful planning required to not only conduct a successful NRFU, but to the carry our other checks and quality improvement operations necessary to achieve high quality results. Establishing an

effective and sufficient management staff to develop the 2010 census plan, increasing mail response, and enhanced recruiting must be a focus for the Census Bureau.

Finally, I would note that a number of external advisory groups that have been established, which, if properly engaged, could add great value by providing insights and advice in the short period of time that remains before the launch of the 2010 Census.

Mr. Secretary, my only goal in this work is to help as best I can in making the 2010 Census successful. I was pleased to serve as an advisor on this matter and I would be pleased to offer you any additional assistance that would be helpful. Please do not hesitate to call upon me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John H. Thompson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John H. Thompson