



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 22, 2010

A Taxpayer's Dime Is a Terrible Thing to Waste

Did you know that in 2010 the federal government spent \$2.9 million for a study of the video game "World of Warcraft"? How about \$1.8 million for a neon sign museum in Las Vegas? Or \$823,000 for teaching South African men how to wash their private parts?

These are just a handful of the wasteful spending initiatives detailed in a recently released [report](#) from Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.). Titled *Wastebook 2010*, the 85-page report lists 100 projects, totaling over \$11.5 billion, that Coburn aptly points out "would hardly merit tax dollars in flush times," let alone at a time when the government is already spending "well over \$1 trillion more than it collect[s] in taxes."



Among the other boondoggles in Coburn's report are:

- \$175 million for maintaining "hundreds" of unused Department of Veterans Affairs buildings, "including a pink, octagonal monkey house in Dayton, Ohio";
- \$615,000 for a "free" Grateful Dead archive at the University of California at Santa Cruz;
- Nearly \$1 million "to infuse zoos around the United States with snippets of poetry";
- \$15.68 million for a 2,900-acre shooting range near Las Vegas that, despite promises that it would be "a huge tourist attraction," ended up losing \$870,000 this year;
- \$31,350 for a Government Printing Office comic book to teach children the history of printing, which is being sold at a loss of \$5.70 per book;
- \$150,000 for a Vermont "critter crossing" to save the lives of salamanders and other amphibians;
- \$47.6 million for an Atlanta streetcar system that traverses the same route as the existing subway system;
- \$133 million for Census Bureau advertising, including \$2.5 million for a Super Bowl commercial, that made precisely no difference in the census participation rate, which was unchanged from 2000;
- \$442,340 "to study the number of male prostitutes in Vietnam and their social setting"; and
- \$5 million for a Federal Aviation Administration "conference" that ABC News reported "was little more than an excuse to throw a three-week-long Christmas party."

Then there is waste that simple economization could prevent. For example, says Coburn's report, the Department of Energy, which endlessly harangues Americans about the need to restrict our lifestyles to conserve energy, "consumes more energy than all but one other federal civilian agency (the U.S. Postal Service)" and, according to a DOE Inspector General's report, "could save over \$2.2 million in electric



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utility costs annually, equating to the amount of electricity needed to power over 3,200 homes per year, by turning off the lights and using more efficient technology.” Encouraging federal employees to print fewer documents, reducing unneeded courthouse space, and ending the daily printing of the *Congressional Register* could also save taxpayers tens of millions of dollars a year.

Eliminating duplicative programs could also recoup some costs. The Department of Agriculture currently has two very similar programs designed to promote exports of U.S. farm products, one of which could easily be terminated. The Department of Health and Human Services, likewise, has a program for “health care facilities and activities” that duplicates existing efforts within HHS itself as well as “other Federal, state and private efforts,” according to an Office of Management and Budget report. Even more egregiously, the Justice Department has actually asked Congress to shut down its National Drug Intelligence Center because its operations duplicate those of other Drug Enforcement Administration facilities, yet Congress has failed to do so, continuing to fund the center to the tune of \$44 million annually — more than \$500 million spent thus far.

In his introduction to the report, Coburn asks, “At a time when we are borrowing over \$44,000 for every person in the country, are these items a priority and are they a federal responsibility?” The obvious answer to both is *no*. While a few of these programs fall under the federal government’s constitutional authority, the overwhelming majority do not and should be terminated as soon as possible — and even those that are constitutional could stand to be cut severely. Coburn, in fact, makes an excellent case for drastic spending cuts, describing how federal outlays were slashed by more than 40 percent after World War II, resulting in both the elimination of the deficit and “a period of unrivaled economic expansion,” precisely the opposite of the doomsday predictions offered up by the establishment media at the time.

Most of the examples cited by Coburn are congressional earmarks. The incoming Republican House of Representatives would do well to live up to its promises of banning such spending. At the same time, Congress needs to address much bigger budget-busters such as Social Security, Medicare, and defense. Any legislator who is unsure of which items to cut has only to consult the document he will [pledge](#) to “support and defend” and “bear true faith and allegiance to” upon taking office: the U.S. Constitution.



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