



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on October 23, 2014

Sen. Coburn's Final 2014 Wastebook Is Funny, Sad, and Outrageous

Oklahoma Republican Senator Tom Coburn's [final edition](#) of his "Wastebook" lists 100 ways that the federal government is wasting taxpayer dollars on wacky, useless, and exasperating projects. Coburn first served in the House of Representatives for three terms and then two more terms as Senator. Battling prostate cancer and keeping his pledge not to run for a third term, Coburn is retiring at the end of this year. He has rightfully earned the sobriquet from big spending Democrats as "Dr. No."



Journalists across the political spectrum enjoyed selecting their own "favorite" projects to explore, decry, and ridicule. Josh Hicks at the *Washington Post* picked his favorite nine, including "Swedish massages for rabbits," a project of the National Institute of Health which paid \$387,000 for a two-year study to see if rabbits recovered more quickly from exercise if they were given massages afterwards.

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Hicks also chose the stoner musical entitled "Classically Cannabis: The High Note Series" that was funded to the tune of \$14,000 in a grant given to the Colorado Symphony Orchestra. He especially enjoyed learning about how U.S. Coast Guard craft were used to provide waterfront security for private parties in front of some of the nation's most exclusive shorefront real estate. With some of the craft costing \$1,500 an hour, taxpayers were hit with a bill for more than \$100,000 for these private services.

Hicks noted the especially egregious funding of the "Tower to Nowhere" that was forced by Republican lawmakers from Mississippi onto NASA to complete building a 300-foot tower that the agency has no use for. It was originally designed to test rocket engines that were part of a Bush-era space program that President Obama canceled back in 2010.

And then there's the brand-new bridge in Morrison, Colorado, that cost \$45,000 to demolish after Morrison Mayor Shawn Forey discovered that it was in violation of some congressional "Buy American" provisions that limited the amount of foreign steel that could be used in its construction. The Canadian portion of the bridge exceeded a \$2,500 limit by \$771.64.

Hicks discovered in Coburn's report that the U.S. Postal Service has been shipping consumer items to remote villages in Alaska ever since 1972, costing U.S. taxpayers in excess of \$2.5 billion. In essence this is a subsidy to retailers who receive the goods as they pay the agency about half of what it would really cost them if they used private carriers.

Hicks considered the \$307,500 that three federal agencies invested in studying "Synchronized Swimming for Sea Monkeys." Researchers enjoying taxpayer largess suggested that the creatures, along with other swimming plankton, could "potentially influence the circulation of water in oceans."

Clyde McGrady, writing at MSN.com, picked five different examples from Coburn's report as his



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favorites, including \$200,000 from the Department of Agriculture to Empire Brewing in upstate New York to expand its operation to a 22-acre farm in Cazenovia. There was another \$200,000 grant to fund compost for a company called Worm Power and nearly \$650,000 a year to send anthracite coal from Pennsylvania to military bases in Germany. This was an earmark established back in the 1960s by a Democrat, Daniel Flood, and continues to this day.

McGrady was annoyed to discover that the Department of Interior's Fish and Wildlife agency is spending \$10,000 every year to "cover the cost to monitor grasses, restore 2 acres as a demonstration and publish a guide on best practices for cultivating the cordgrass known formally as *Spartina alterniflora*." Essentially, according to McGrady, this was \$10,000 a year being paid to someone to watch grass grow.

McGrady saved the best for last: a \$50,000 USDA grant to package and market alpaca manure in "Poop Paks."

The top 10 from GOPUSA.com included the grant for the sea monkeys' synchronized swimming and the Swedish massages for rabbits as well as NASA's "Tower to Nowhere." The GOP's website took umbrage at the \$5 million grant from the National Science Foundation to Columbia University to develop an interactive game to spur climate change activism. Called FutureCoast, the game is set in an alternative world where fictional voicemails have been transported back in time, allowing people to listen in on what earthlings from the future say about the climate.

GOPUSA.com's ire was also raised when it discovered in Coburn's report that the Department of Defense was paying 16 times the going rate for certain helicopter parts, costing taxpayers \$9 million in the process. It also decried the subsidies being granted to sports stadiums which are being built through tax-free bonds which cost taxpayers nearly \$150 million a year in lost tax revenues. It also scorned the \$72,000 the Navy was spending every year to send magazines and other propaganda to members of Congress to promote various green initiatives, as well as the nearly \$200,000 federal agencies invested in text messages to drunks reminding them not to drink too much.

There was also the \$371,000 spent by the National Institute of Health to find out if mothers had the same affection for dogs as they do for their kids.

What really irked GOPUSA.com however, was the \$50 million federal agencies spent last year to send their bureaucrats on unpaid vacations, calling them "administrative leave," which allowed them to continue to enjoy their healthcare benefits, life insurance coverage, and continued contributions to their retirement plans. More than 1,000 federal employees were on paid leave for at least six months and hundreds more were given paid absences from work for a year or longer. According to Coburn's study, nearly 60,000 federal employees received paid leave for an entire month over a two-year period, in addition to vacation time and paid holidays.

Does any of this do any good? After all, Coburn's staff is also being paid by U.S. taxpayers to uncover, explore, and confirm these wasteful projects. Coburn thinks so:

Victories are occurring despite the actions and lack of actions taken by Congress.

[The Bridge to Nowhere] may have been approved by Congress, but it was never built because of the public outrage it sparked....

An airport in Oklahoma that averaged just one flight per month was landing nearly half a million in federal subsidies a year was closed after appearing in Wastebook....



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The National Science Foundation canceled a climate change musical showcased in Wastebook.

Senator Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) may pick up where Coburn is leaving off, so taxpayers can continue to be informed as to what their representatives and senators are doing to, and for, them. The wonder is that the waste isn't vastly greater than being reported given the perception that the federal government is a giant punch bowl funded with taxpayer dollars that nobody's watching.

Photo of Sen. Tom Coburn and the Wastebook: AP Images

A graduate of Cornell University and a former investment advisor, Bob is a regular contributor to The New American magazine and blogs frequently at www.LightFromTheRight.com, primarily on economics and politics.



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