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A Sea of Paper

SEPTEMBER 30TH 2011 BY NEWS

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By Jo Ann Emerson

The White House Office of Management and Budget is a repository of rather dry information about the federal government. When OMB says something about how we interact with our federal government, however, it is usually wise to listen.

Last week, the office put out a report quantifying the amount of time Americans spent filling out federal government forms in 2010. The total? You'll be as shocked as I was, I am sure: 8.8 billion hours.

As Americans, we collectively spent a total of 1,000 years of time on paperwork in a single year. That's absolutely unbelievable. Every hour spent filling out compliance paperwork, reporting requirements, tax forms, applications, reimbursements, and surveys is an hour small business owners can't put into growing their business, an hour family members can't put into their families, an hour that a health care provider can't dedicate to their patients. Paperwork doesn't add to our American society; it subtracts.

If the value of each of those 8.8 billion hours was just \$20, then the total cost of this colossal burden to our country of compliance with our own government is \$176 billion every year.

And paperwork is the chief product of the aggressive regulatory environment in our nation's capital. The burden on Americans, our families, our businesses and our institutions is growing by the month. Where government should be getting more efficient

and less expensive, it is getting bigger and more complicated.

Turning the tide requires us to think in terms of the real world – another thing that does not come easy to bureaucrats in concrete buildings in Washington DC. What's the real cost of this regulation? What does it mean to a small business faced with a raft of new requirements, forms and instructions? How much more complex will this make filing the average American's federal tax return? Is this regulation more important than creating a good job in Missouri? Ten jobs? A hundred?

Unfortunately, our federal bureaucracy doesn't operate this way. Where there should be freedom and individuality, the federal government has an irresistible urge to categorize and corral. That is why our government is not viewed as a partner to innovation, but rather an obstacle.

In the private sector, there is always more work to be done than there are people to do it. The last thing any small business needs is a pair of idle hands. Our agribusinesses, our small businesses and our manufacturers depend on getting the most from their operations in terms of efficiency, quality and productivity. Government paperwork is the ultimate waste of resources. Time and effort go in – but what comes out?

Increasingly, the answer to that question is frustration, frustration, and more frustration. I encounter dozens of Missouri businesses in the Eighth Congressional District each year that need help intervening in a new, ridiculous requirement of a federal agency or just plain understanding the forms they have to fill out to stay in compliance with the law. Our health care providers have it especially bad. Just when they learn how to communicate with the federal government using one set of codes, the bureaucracy produces another set they are forced to use.

Just recently, I saw one such new form. It was meant to replace a 2008 form. The difference between old and new? Nothing. Not one line. I read it from start to finish. Instead of saying 2008 at the end, it will say 2012.

Oh, there was one other small change: The charge of filing a fraudulent claim for failing to use the new form starting next year. Federal forms cost Americans money as well as time, and in many cases today – both.”

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