

Special count

in Gulf backed

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Census Bureau concerned with including displaced citizens

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WASHINGTON — It would only be "fair" for the federal government to conduct a special census in the Gulf Coast to count residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina, according to the head of the Census Bureau. The question is: Who would pay for it?

The Census Bureau is aware of the challenges of doing the 2010 count in Gulf Coast states and is planning to take steps to address the concerns, including going door-to-door in some parts of the region to make sure hundreds of thousands of residents get questionnaires.

But Census Bureau officials, local governments and community groups have raised concerns that the 2010 census count won't include all Gulf Coast residents, particularly those who haven't yet returned after the 2005 hurricanes.

"The fair thing to do for the country is to do another count of that area later on," Census Bureau Director Robert Groves said in an interview. He said Gulf Coast communities are still working to help residents whose homes were damaged or destroyed to return. "They're rebuilding. They want more people there. People are coming back."

Much is at stake for Gulf Coast communities. Census data is used to distribute \$400 billion in federal funds and determine the number of seats each state gets in the

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House of Representatives.

Community activists and national civil rights groups are calling for a special census.

"There is a faction of the population whose intent to return has been delayed," said Vincent Sylvain, Louisiana state coordinator for the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. He said some federal programs to help hurricane victims return have failed. "Are we going to continue to lose because of Hurricane Katrina?"

Groves said the agency has conducted more than 300 special censuses since the last major count in 2000. Many were for communities that had population growth or annexations and were looking for more federal funding.

Groves said the bureau could return to the Gulf Coast for a special census if local or state governments request it. But the cost of a special

census must be reimbursed and it is unknown whether state or local governments would be willing to pay. Dan Turner, spokesman for Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, said the state doesn't have much extra money to pay for a special count. And it probably wouldn't change much anyway, he said.

"I think the supposition is that a great deal of Mississippi Gulf Coast residents have returned at this point," he said. "But the larger concern for Mississippi right now would be the cost. Given that we are looking at least two, if not several more really tough budget years, the idea of coming up with the extra money for another count on the Gulf Coast is a problem."

Census experts said getting an accurate count of Gulf Coast residents since the hurricanes has been a challenge.

"If the Census Bureau can get behind doing an interim count of the Gulf Coast region between the 2010 and 2020 census, then that would be a terrific way to be able to gauge how the region is growing,"

said Audrey Singer, a census expert at the Brookings Institution. "However, the cost and the politics of doing such a count may prevent it from happening."

Groves said he doesn't know how much a special census for the Gulf Coast would cost.

"I'm not saying it's cheap, but somehow other areas have gotten the political will to assemble the money," Groves said.

Marc Morial, chairman of the Census Bureau's 2010 Census Advisory Committee and a former mayor of New Orleans, said Congress could include the cost of the special census in the 2011 budget.

But congressional lawmakers, including Sen. Thomas Carper, D-Del., chairman of a subcommittee that oversees the Census Bureau, have concerns about the potential cost and deadlines for congressional redistricting. Morial and civil rights groups praise census officials for their efforts and said they expect them to follow through on their commitment for an accurate count of Gulf Coast residents.