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Coalition for an Accountable Recovery Praises Timely Release of Recovery Act Recipient Reports; Criticizes Tools for Understanding Data

Washington, DC – The Coalition for an Accountable Recovery (CAR) gave mixed reactions to the first wave of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act) recipient data disclosed today at Recovery.gov, the official reporting website.

“The Recovery Act is proving to be the most transparent federal spending law ever enacted,” said Gary D. Bass, executive director of OMB Watch. “It is a watershed because the Obama administration has successfully created a new reporting system that requires recipients of Recovery Act funds to report in a timely manner how they are using federal resources. Unfortunately, the Recovery.gov website is an ineffective and inadequate tool for understanding the very small share of Recovery Act dollars reported today.”

“Today marks a new chapter in federal transparency,” said Phil Mattera, research director of Good Jobs First. “We expect a surge in taxpayer interest in the Recovery Act in particular and government’s role in the economy in general. But people trying to figure out how the Recovery Act is helping in their community do not yet have all the information they need.”

While acknowledging the significant precedent set by today's data release, the Coalition expects significant improvements will be made to the Recovery.gov website before the recipient data about grants and loans are released on Oct. 30. Some of the main problems that need to be fixed include:

- **Awkward Download Function:** The download procedures made available today are extremely cumbersome and come without explanation of the fields. There need to be national downloads of the data in addition to state downloads. The machine-readable formats as called for in the Recovery Board’s website contract need to be implemented now that data is available.
- **Search by Recipient:** Now that there is recipient data, it needs to be searchable by recipient, which it currently is not.
- **Confusing Map Functionality:** The maps can be confusing, particularly since they simply show the total number of awards – combining prime and sub-recipient awards without distinction.
- **Inadequate Search and Sort Capabilities:** The only search capability is by zip code, and it is only available on the homepage. In addition, at times, the website is not clear

whether the data is about a contractor's location or where the contractor is performing the work. Also, in the table view, it is not possible to sort the data by headers in the tables. Moreover, the website shows that \$16 billion in contracts have been awarded, but there is no easy way to add up the numbers to cross-check.

- **Unable to Reconcile with Other Government Databases:** There is no way to reconcile data between USAspending.gov and the recipient reports on amount of funds spent. For instance, USAspending.gov shows vastly different amounts going to the top contractors of Recovery Act funds. Further, there are problems matching contractors within Recovery.gov with those listed in USAspending.gov. The top contractor listed on Recovery.gov (SANOFI PASTEUR INC.) uses a separate DUNS number than a similarly named company listed in USAspending.gov.
- **Data Quality Problems:** The Recovery.gov homepage notes the Recovery Board withheld data from two of the federal contract recipient reports because of “their obviously incorrect submissions.” Yet one recipient report that was included lists it creating 4.7 million jobs, which is also an obvious error and should have been corrected before it was released.
- **Difficult Website Navigation and Explanation:** The website itself remains difficult to navigate. Additionally, many terms used throughout the website are not in the glossary and hyperlinks to data sources go nowhere.

"The Recovery Board has been responsive to input in the past, and we're confident that the website will continue to be improved," said Bass. "It is, after all, still a work in progress."