

SCIENTIFIC MEETINGS

U.S. Agencies Feel the Pinch of Travel Cutbacks

Two years ago, the General Services Administration, which is responsible for improving efficiency across the U.S. government, held a conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, that became notorious. Attendees enjoyed delights such as artisanal cheese, expensive sushi, and a mind-reading session—at a cost to taxpayers of \$800,000. An investigation and a congressional hearing earlier this year prompted the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to impose government-wide restrictions on conference travel—and now some scientific meetings are paying the price.

The restrictions, spelled out in an 11 May OMB memo, have shrunk attendance at several meetings over the past few months. Recently, they caused the American Astronomical Society (AAS) to cancel its annual conference on space science, which was to be held at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, on 28 and 29 November. Ironically, the conference, which promised to feature several speakers from NASA headquarters, was devoted to the theme of “Space Science and Planetary Exploration in an Age of Austerity.”

“We were going to discuss how to do meaningful space science in a tight fiscal climate,” says AAS President Frank Slazer. When key NASA speakers dropped out because of travel restrictions, the meeting fell apart. “Bottom line, to avoid spending a small amount of money on our conference, we had to cancel a meeting that was going to be focused on doing challenging—and expensive—space research at lower cost.”

The OMB memo specifically requires that agencies conduct a senior-level review before participating in conferences that might cost the agency more than \$100,000. It also prohibits agencies from spending more than \$500,000 on any single conference without obtaining an exemption from the agency head. In addition, the memo directs agencies to cut annual travel expenditures 30% below fiscal year 2010 levels starting in FY 2013, which began on 1 October.

The impact began to be felt within weeks of OMB’s ruling. To fit under the \$100,000 expenditure cap, NASA whittled down its participation in the International Space Sta-

tion Research and Development Conference in mid-June, a Denver meeting also organized by AAS. Some 84 NASA employees were supposed to attend, but only 50 went—enough, AAS reasoned, to proceed. For the Pasadena meeting, however, more than eight speakers who had been invited from NASA headquarters said they could not make it. The depleted roster made the meeting unviable, and the association decided to cut its losses.

Other disciplines are bearing the brunt as well. A symposium on environmental technology sponsored each year by the Department of Defense—to be held in Washington, D.C., in November—was called off, the organizers say, because they did not have enough time to obtain the budgetary approvals for travel required under the new rules. Nearly 80 employees of the National Weather Service had to drop out of the

ting edge of science and could affect U.S. competitiveness in the high-performance computing field,” he says.

The OMB memo appears to have had far less impact at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Initially, NIH officials worried that the restrictions would apply to peer-review panels. After NIH Director Francis Collins made a personal appeal, OMB responded that meetings of peer-review panels and federal advisory committees are not considered conferences and are exempt from the spending limits.

Nor has the OMB memo affected grants for conferences that cost more than \$100,000, NIH says. The secretary of Health and Human Services has given waivers for several big meetings with more than \$500,000 in NIH expenditures, including the International AIDS Conference and the Society for Neuroscience’s annual meeting.

Travel restrictions may be causing some problems now, but things could get a lot worse if Congress enacts the Government Spending Accountability Act of 2012, which passed the House of Representatives in September. That legislation would make the OMB travel restrictions permanent and make it harder to obtain waivers. Several scientific societies, including the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and the American Physical Society, have objected to the bill.

Howard Garrison, FASEB’s deputy executive director for policy, acknowledges the need to rein in spending on conferences in hard times. But he says researchers across the life sciences and other disciplines are already making efforts to cut down on meeting costs—for instance, by taking public transportation instead of jumping into a cab to get from their hotel to the conference venue. However, he says, meetings are especially important for young scientists, and scientists inside and outside the government need to continue interacting face-to-face: “Administrative officials who run grant programs need to be able to get out there and speak to the research community.”

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Exception. NIH’s role in the Society for Neuroscience’s annual meeting is one of a rare few exemptions from new federal travel restrictions.

National Weather Association meeting held in Madison in October because the Department of Commerce, which oversees NWS, did not approve the travel in time.

The Department of Energy (DOE) has cut the number of laboratory staff members who will attend the premier supercomputing conference, SC12, being held in Salt Lake City from 10 to 16 November. Last year, 550 DOE lab people attended; only 400 are going this year. DOE labs, which typically sponsor booths at the conference to tout their latest research and foster recruiting, won’t have any this year. DOE’s reduced involvement is of serious concern, says SC12 Chair Jeffrey Hollingsworth, a computer scientist at the University of Maryland, College Park. “This affects their ability to be engaged in the cut-