



**NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ENGINEERING
INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE**

October 3, 2014

The Honorable Shaun Donovan
Director, Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Director Donovan:

The current federal policy implemented to eliminate wasteful and unnecessary travel by federal employees is having the undesirable side effect of curbing very productive travel to scientific meetings and causing unintentional harm to the functioning of the research enterprise. The federal government is the nation's largest employer of scientists and engineers, and the research community needs these highly qualified people to be part of this essential interactive process.

On May 11, 2012, the Office of Management and Budget issued OMB 12-12. It states: "The Federal Government has a responsibility to act as a careful steward of taxpayer dollars ensuring that Federal funds are used for purposes that are appropriate, cost effective, and important to the core mission of executive departments and agencies. ... Travel is often necessary for Federal employees to discharge their duties effectively and the travel industry plays an important role in creating jobs and supporting local economies; however, as good stewards of Federal funds, agencies must do all they can to manage their travel budgets efficiently. Accordingly, in FY2013, each agency shall spend at least 30 percent less on travel expenses covered by this memorandum than in FY2010."

In the two years since this memorandum was issued, it has resulted in a number of unintended consequences for scientific research, which is a significant driver of the U.S. economy. Just as the U.S. faces growing competition from other nations for leadership in science, engineering and medicine, the travel regulations threaten to reduce the effectiveness of our national investment in science and innovation. The one-size-fits-all approach to travel restrictions fails to take into account the critical importance of face-to-face interactions in fostering scientific creativity and the particular needs of science-based agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and various parts of the Departments of Energy and Defense. The leaders of these agencies are in the best position to report on how the current policy has hampered their ability to fulfill their missions, to plan sensibly, to use employees effectively, to recruit and retain employees, and to control administrative costs caused by implementing travel restrictions. Our concern is about how the travel policy has also affected communication about research advances and diffusion of new ideas.

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Science and engineering are often activities in which the work of individual scientists and engineers depends on the work of others. Scientific conferences provide the opportunity for leading experts to share research results, test new ideas, and brainstorm about emerging opportunities. They discuss the future direction of their discipline and its scientific priorities. It is also a place for younger scientists to receive mentoring from those wiser in the ways and expectations of the scientific establishment. The information exchanged at conferences is different from what can be obtained from reading the scientific literature, which often has a lag time between submission and publication of many months. At scientific and technical meetings, attendees share information on current unpublished research, on their reasons for pursuing a certain course of inquiry, and on the related questions that they hope others will answer. They engage one another with challenges and suggestions. These interactions, both formal and informal, fulfill an essential role in helping researchers decide what research directions to pursue when they return to their laboratories. They also help federal scientific program managers decide on which scientific directions are the most promising and which areas deserve greater or less federal investment.

One might ask why in-person meetings are still important in this age of internet communications. Advances in communications have without question contributed to interactions among researchers and fulfill many important communications functions, but they are a poor substitute for the intensity and richness of the exchanges, debates, and challenges that occur when researchers meet in person. As science has progressed, it has become more complex, more interdisciplinary, and more international. Scientific meetings have become ever more necessary and productive in advancing knowledge and transforming this new knowledge into products and services that improve our lives, strengthen our security, and create jobs for our citizens. By reducing the participation of federal science, engineering and medical program managers in such meetings and conferences, the United States is inadvertently hampering the productivity and nimbleness of science and engineering compared to that of other countries.

It might be thought at first that we are exaggerating the effect of these travel restrictions on Federal scientific employees. However, as one indication of their impact, one branch of the Department of Defense reported to us that in 2012 before the travel restrictions went into effect, 115 conferences were attended. In 2013 that number fell to two and in 2014 the present number is seven. We have also heard many stories in which invitations to have government officials speak at conferences have been sharply curtailed as the many-month agency approval process leads conference planners to conclude that they cannot count on government employee attendance. This is weakening the bonds between the government, universities, and the private sector, a partnership that has propelled U.S. leadership in science, engineering and medicine, and one that our international competitors are seeking to emulate. There have been serious deleterious effects on national security as entire conferences on some topics have had to be either canceled or radically altered in subject matter because of federal travel restrictions.

The federal government's scientific and engineering workforce is an essential partner in the research community. Some of the world's scientific leaders are working at the Department of Energy's

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national laboratories, at the National Institutes of Health, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and at the research laboratories of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. These researchers play a vital role in maintaining the U.S. position as the world's scientific leader by guiding disciplines and explaining federal priorities and investments. Their participation in scientific and technical meetings contributes to the vibrancy of the U.S. research enterprise. The knowledge they help produce is critical to achieving the national goals of economic strength, military security, and public health.

Recognizing the need to reduce federal travel costs while accomplishing the missions of the agencies, we ask that OMB 12-12 be modified so that federal science agency heads have the flexibility to manage budget allocations for travel consistent with their missions and science priorities. Research is a shared responsibility and a collaborative activity where government's absence will delay and potentially derail essential benefits for the nation. Providing that flexibility will allow agency heads to mitigate unintended damaging consequences to their research missions. Federal employee attendance at national or international scientific conferences is not the same as GSA's unfortunate decision to spend extravagant sums on an event in Las Vegas intended to boost the morale of GSA employees.

The United States has benefited in many ways from its position as the world's scientific leader. In a world where many countries have made it a priority to increase their scientific capacity, we cannot be complacent about that leadership. We must do all that we can to maintain the effectiveness and productivity of our scientific research enterprise.

Sincerely,



Ralph J. Cicerone
President
National Academy of Sciences



C.D. (Dan) Mote, Jr.
President
National Academy of Engineering



Victor J. Dzau
President
Institute of Medicine

CC: John Holdren, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology