

July 29, 2014

The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Chairman, Senate Committee on Homeland
Security & Governmental Affairs
513 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Coburn
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
172 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Carper and Ranking Member Coburn:

As organizations representing the U.S. science and engineering communities, we write to express our concerns about current and proposed restrictions on the ability of federal and contractor scientists and engineers to participate in scientific and technical conferences. The Coburn-Heitkamp substitute to S. 1347, Conference Accountability Act of 2013 would raise existing barriers and perpetuate unintended negative consequences the Administration's regulations have already imposed on our scientific enterprise and national competitiveness.

Scientific and technical conferences help maintain a "talented and interconnected workforce"—one of the three critical pillars of a vibrant, economically productive scientific enterprise identified in the National Research Council's *Furthering America's Research Enterprise* report. These conferences promote collaborations between federal scientists and those in private industry and academia, provide for rapid dissemination of federally funded research results, and provide high quality professional development for the next generation of scientists and engineers. For federal employees also involved in program management, conferences are cost-effective venues for overseeing multiple projects in one location, disseminating information about agency policies and programs, and gathering information on the most promising research directions to guide smart decisions when allocating federal research funding.

Since the implementation of restrictive travel policies in OMB Memorandum M-12-12, conference participation by scientists and engineers who are also federal employees has dropped precipitously. This—in conjunction with the ongoing sequestration cuts to federal research investments—has led to canceled conferences and fewer speaking invitations for government scientists, slowing scientific progress and diminishing the stature of U.S. science agencies at home and abroad. In its January 2014 letter to this committee, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics reported that several scientific and technical conferences were either canceled or severely scaled back in FY 2013 alone due to a lack of federal participation.

In the recently released National Research Council report *Strategic Engagement in Global S&T: Opportunities for Defense Research*, the study's committee members found that the Administration's travel and conference regulations limit the Department of Defense's ability to maintain global awareness of research advances, recruit and retain top talent, and leverage advances that occur abroad—an increasingly important factor as the U.S. fraction of R&D spending has dropped to less than one-third of the global total.¹ The Committee's co-chair stated

¹National Science Board, *Science & Engineering Indicators 2014*
(<http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind14/index.cfm/chapter-4/c4h.htm>)

unequivocally that “the barriers that currently exist need to be lowered.” This bill would do just the opposite, increasing regulatory burden and adding another layer to the frequently onerous agency travel approval processes already in place. While this particular study focused only on effects on defense related science and technology, these regulations affect all agencies and have similar effects on the entire science and engineering community.

While direct spending on travel and conferences has fallen since the regulations were implemented, the administrative costs associated with the travel activities that remain have skyrocketed. For example, the Energy Department’s National Laboratory Directors Council Executive Committee found a six-fold increase in their administrative costs related to overseeing conference participation in 2012, as detailed in a letter sent to the committee on January 16, 2014. As the committee considers statutory regulations on conference and travel spending, we encourage you to reach out to other agencies, especially those with large federal and contractor scientific and engineering staffs, to understand the bureaucratic burden these regulations have already imposed.

We wholeheartedly share the goal of preventing waste and providing accountability and transparency in government spending, but we believe it is possible to do so without adding administrative burden or cutting off government scientist and engineer participation in conferences. As the committee considers the benefits and costs of legislating in this area, we stand ready to work with you to mitigate unintended negative consequences on the careers of federal scientists and the larger scientific enterprise.

Sincerely,

Agricultural & Applied Economics
Association
American Anthropological Association
American Association for the Advancement
of Science
American Association for Dental Research
American Association of Petroleum
Geologists
American Astronomical Society
American Chemical Society
American Dairy Science Association
American Educational Research Association
American Geophysical Union
American Geosciences Institute
American Institute of Aeronautics and
Astronautics

American Institute of Biological Sciences
American Mathematical Society
American Physiological Society
American Psychological Association
American Society of Agronomy
American Society of Animal Science
American Society of Civil Engineers
American Society for Engineering
Education
American Society for Horticultural Science
American Society for Microbiology
American Society for Nutrition
American Society of Plant Biologists
American Sociological Association
American Statistical Association

American Veterinary Medical Association
ASME
Association of American Geographers
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of Earth Science Editors
Association of Environmental &
Engineering Geologists
Association of Universities for Research in
Astronomy
Association for Women in Mathematics
Biophysical Society
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Council of Energy Research and Education
Leaders
Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource
Economics
Council of Scientific Society Presidents
Crop Science Society of America
Ecological Society of America
Entomological Society of America
Federation of American Societies for
Experimental Biology
Federation of Animal Science Societies
Genetics Society of America
Geological Society of America
Health Physics Society
Human Factors and Ergonomics Society
IEEE-USA
Institute of Food Technologists

Materials Research Society
National Association of Geoscience
Teachers
National Coalition for Food and Agricultural
Research
National Council for Science and the
Environment
National Earth Science Teachers
Association
National Society of Professional Engineers
Natural Science Collections Alliance
New Mexico Optics Industry Association
The Optical Society
Ornithological Council
Research!America
Society for Conservation Biology
Society for Industrial and Applied
Mathematics
Society for Industrial and Organizational
Psychology
Society for Organic Petrology
Soil Science Society of America
SPIE, the International Society for Optics
and Photonics
Tech-X
University Corporation for Atmospheric
Research
The US Chapter of the International
Association of Hydrogeologists

CC: Members, Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs

Please contact Joshua H. Shiode, John Bahcall Public Policy Fellow of the American Astronomical Society, at (202) 328-2010 x113 or joshua.shiode@aas.org for more information.