

NASA Advisory Council Recommendation

Over-Application of Travel Restrictions 2015-01-02 (SC-01)

Recommendation:

The Council recommends that NASA change its definition of the class of persons (specifically, “contractors”) who are subject to the travel restrictions externally mandated for Civil Servants. This definition could continue to provide travel controls on those personnel that NASA considers appropriate (for example, scientists at specific institutions), but should not include others, such as those at most universities, non-profits, and private companies funded through mission contracts.

Major Reasons for Proposing the Recommendation:

The Council finds that the broad definition of “contractor” with respect to the application of travel restrictions using NASA funds has resulted in significant loss of efficiency and scientific productivity across the science community. This broad loss of efficiency and productivity is unnecessary and solely driven by what appears to be NASA’s internal choice to expand the group included in the mandated travel restrictions. Regular and open communication between scientists and technologists is essential for healthy and productive research. Although electronic and virtual means of communication play an increasing role in interacting with colleagues and can accommodate much routine project activity, they cannot replace face-to-face interactions. Specific examples include the much-valued give-and-take of vibrant (sometimes heated) discussions, insight derived from multiple ideas being discussed spontaneously, informal (often unplanned) interactions and brainstorming that occurs before or after a presentation. These in-person contacts are extremely cost-effective and are key components in productive scientific interactions.

Consequences of No Action on the Proposed Recommendation:

Scientists not normally considered as NASA employees, and not required by external mandates, will continue to be included in the travel restrictions, which will continue to lead to significant loss of efficiency and scientific productivity for NASA.

NASA Response:

NASA non-concurs with the recommendation.

There are currently no limitations on travel (civil servants and contractor employees) as long as the travel is within budget and approved by appropriate supervisors.

If the travel is to a conference, the following guidance applies. There are no limitations for domestic conference attendance (civil servant and contractor employees). The only limitation on conference attendance is the statutory limit of 50 persons participating in a **foreign** conference. NASA applies this 50-person limitation only to civil servants and Jet Propulsion Laboratory employees. Those who are funded through grants, cooperative agreements, and other contracts are exempt from this limitation.

All NASA participants (civil servants and contractor employees) for all conference events must be entered into NASA’s Conference Tracking System (whether there are costs or not) as well as non-

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NASA participants where NASA is paying for all or some of their costs. This tracking is necessary due to the external requirement (codified in law) to report Agency conference spending for conferences costing the Agency over \$20,000. NASA is also required by law to have conferences costing the Agency \$100,000 or more and \$500,000 or more approved specifically by the Deputy Administrator and Administrator, respectively. NASA's Conference Tracking System helps to facilitate this process.