

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Headquarters

Washington, DC 20546-0001



February 8, 2013

Reply to Attn of:

OLIA/2012-00310f:SS:amb

The Honorable Tom Coburn, MD
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Coburn:

This is in response to your letter of April 16, 2012, to the Administrator requesting information regarding NASA conference and travel expenditures from FY 2010 to the present. The enclosed materials provide the information requested in your letter.

While NASA has been steadily enhancing its conference review processes since 2008, it made a number of significant improvements in FY 2012. Starting in October 2011, in accordance with Administration direction, NASA required that all NASA-sponsored conferences be centrally reviewed and approved by the Deputy Administrator; this process also required improved documentation of the planning and justification for the investments made in conferences hosted by NASA. Starting in May 2012, again in accordance with Administration guidance, NASA implemented reviews of spending and senior approvals for all conferences with costs over \$100,000. In June 2012, NASA updated its conference policies to enhance review and approval requirements for NASA-sponsored conferences with costs less than \$100,000, and to ban industry and others' widely attended gatherings and NASA-directly funded meals at NASA-sponsored conferences. This focus, along with the overall emphasis placed on travel savings at all levels, led to millions of dollars in reduced spending on conferences in FY 2012.

NASA also spearheaded several key internal initiatives, including savings in connection with NASA's three largest internal conferences, by directing that all three be changed in the coming years to a virtual format (and piloting the first of these as a virtual event in October 2012). For one of these conferences that was already essentially underway, NASA reduced its size significantly. These changes are conservatively estimated to have saved over \$2 million in FY 2012. In addition, NASA centralized a conference database tool to permit better coordinated planning across the Agency, and expanded the scope of events tracked as "conferences," consistent with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Memorandum 12-12, issued in May 2012. This broader definition was also applied retroactively, so the information in the enclosed report encompasses more types of events than prior reports by NASA.

NASA spent the vast majority of the funds (80 percent in FY 2012) associated with conference attendance for presentations and participation at scientific and technical conferences. This practice helps to fulfill one of the fundamental mandates of the National Aeronautics and Space Act that NASA “shall provide for the widest practicable and appropriate dissemination of information concerning its activities and the results thereof.” At such events, NASA scientists, engineers, and leaders present scientific and technical papers and participate in interchanges on leading-edge research and technology with peers in the Federal government, the science community, the aeronautics and aerospace industries, and our international partners at conferences. Conferences attended and sponsored by NASA address a broad and diverse range of scientific and engineering challenges faced by NASA in carrying out its missions, including climate and other Earth science research, advanced aeronautics, and the cutting-edge technologies needed for both current and planned robotic and human space flight programs. As the enclosed report (Enclosure 1) shows, in keeping with past reports to NASA’s Office of Inspector General and Congress, a clear majority of conferences sponsored by NASA were undertaken in furtherance of this key statutory goal.

In addition to facilitating the dissemination and advancement of scientific research, conferences also serve as a cost-effective way for NASA to carry out other mission-related purposes, such as educational outreach, program development, institutional planning, and information gathering. For example, conferences on program management provide opportunities for examination of current trends in aerospace project and engineering management by offering forums for the exchange and dissemination of best practices, new ideas, and training to help the Agency cost-effectively meet the toughest challenges in space exploration today.

Items specifically requested in your letter and included in this response are:

1. “(a) Total cost of agency travel related to conferences (including but not limited to per diems, airline tickets, hotel rooms and car rentals).”

“(b) The number and a full listing of all conferences attended by your employees during each fiscal year, including the conference title, the location, date, and number of employees who attended.

“(c) The number and full listing of conferences that received assistance or support from the agency noting whether the agency was (1) the primary host, (2) a sponsor, or (3) provided support other than attendance. Please include the number of non-federal employees who attended whose costs were covered by the agency, the name of the primary conference sponsor, and the total cost to the agency for each conference hosted and sponsored by the agency or attended by agency staff (including staff salaries, travel, lodging, sponsorship, other related costs), and list the contract numbers for all contracts awarded in support of each conference listed.

“(d) Total number and cost of trips related to conference scouting during each fiscal year.”

The enclosed report lists all identified conferences by date and includes all of the requested information, where available. One caveat is that NASA has no systematic means available to tie traveler salary information to the time associated with individual employee’s conference attendance; moreover, NASA found that it could not estimate the average level given the wide variation in grade level of attendees from conference to conference.

2. “(e) The number and a list of grant programs administered by the agency that require recipients to attend conferences and the total cost for such mandatory conference attendance for each program.”

As part of the data call, we worked with NASA Centers and Headquarters Offices to review grant requirements and no grants were identified that require mandatory awardee attendance at a conference. NASA does require some types of research grants to disseminate the results of the funded research, but these grants do not mandate conference attendance as that means of dissemination. To the extent grantees are invited to present at conferences with respect to their research, it is important to keep in mind that such presentations often prove an important, sometimes essential, step in the review and scrutiny of research results leading up to publication in widely read, peer-reviewed science journals. These are a particularly valuable means of disseminating NASA-funded research results, in keeping with the mandate of the National Aeronautics and Space Act.

In your letter, you also requested copies of new guidance issued by NASA in FY 2012. Enclosure 2 is a compilation of this guidance for your information.

NASA has been steadily strengthening our conference sponsorship and attendance processes and we are currently implementing further improvements in our systems, processes, and reports. These measures are part of our continued efforts to be careful stewards of taxpayer dollars in carrying out our missions.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. We would be pleased to respond to questions regarding this report.

Sincerely,



L. Seth Statler
Associate Administrator
for Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs

2 Enclosures