

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	Materials Research Society
ASME	National Association of Geoscience Teachers
Association of American Geographers	National Coalition for Food and Agricultural Research
Association of American Medical Colleges	National Council for Science and the Environment
Association of Earth Science Editors	National Earth Science Teachers Association
Association of Environmental & Engineering Geologists	National Society of Professional Engineers
Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy	Natural Science Collections Alliance
Association for Women in Mathematics	New Mexico Optics Industry Association
Biophysical Society	The Optical Society
Consortium of Social Science Associations	Ornithological Council
Council of Energy Research and Education Leaders	Research!America
Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics	Society for Conservation Biology
Council of Scientific Society Presidents	Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics
Crop Science Society of America	Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology
Ecological Society of America	Society for Organic Petrology
Entomological Society of America	Soil Science Society of America
Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology	SPIE, the International Society for Optics and Photonics
Federation of Animal Science Societies	Tech-X
Genetics Society of America	University Corporation for Atmospheric Research
Geological Society of America	The US Chapter of the International Association of Hydrogeologists
Health Physics Society	
Human Factors and Ergonomics Society	
IEEE-USA	
Institute of Food Technologists	

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) 643-1227 or joshua.shiode@aaas.org for more information.