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Research, Education, and Economics

ARS □ ERS □ NASS □ NIFA

Bulletin

Title: Conference/Training Attendance, Sponsorship, & Reporting

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This Bulletin provides the policy and procedures for conference attendance and sponsorship, including obtaining the necessary approvals to conduct the event.

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1. Purpose

This Bulletin provides information on requirements for requesting permission to attend or sponsor a conference, including post conference reporting requirements for the four Research, Education, and Economic (REE) mission area agencies: Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Economics Research Service (ERS), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

2. Background

As part of the effort to safeguard Federal funds, agencies should focus on expenses related to conference sponsorship, conference hosting, or attendance of Federal employees at conferences sponsored or hosted by non-Federal entities. Federal agencies and employees must exercise discretion and judgment in ensuring that event expenses are appropriate, necessary, and managed in a manner that minimizes expense to taxpayers.

Office of Management and Budget Memorandum (OMB) M-12-12

The OMB M-12-12, dated May 11, 2012 ([Exhibit 1](#)), specifically requires Executive Departments to:

- Initiate senior level approval of all conference expenses in excess of \$100,000
- Prohibit expenses in excess of \$500,000 on a single conference
- Report publicly on all conference expenses in excess of \$100,000

Accordingly, except for events held solely in a Department of Agriculture (USDA) facility, events (attended or sponsored) in excess of \$100,000 must be approved by the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture.

Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013 (CFCA)

Congress passed the CFCA 2013 Act on March 21, 2013, and the President signed it into law on March 26, 2013. The law includes a Governmentwide general provision in Section 3003 ([Exhibit 2](#)) that creates several new requirements related to conference planning and reporting, but does not relieve other mandated conference reporting requirements. Section 3003 requires that:

Each conference the USDA holds with costs exceeding \$20,000 must be reported to the Inspector General within 15 calendar days of the end date of the conference. The Secretary reports on an annual basis to the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) the cost and contracting procedures for all conferences exceeding \$100,000. Use of FY 2013 funds used for travel and conference activities are consistent with OMB M-12-12. This language makes it an Anti-deficiency Act (ADA) violation to use any FY 2013 funds for travel and conferences that are inconsistent with OMB M-12-12. USDA changed its definition of a conference to be in line with the definition used in the Federal Travel Regulations (FTR) and provided in OMB M-12-12.

3. Policy

All conferences (attended or sponsored) must be approved at the appropriate level prior to contracting and/or attendance.

4. Conference/Training Approval Exceptions

In some cases conference attendance or sponsorship may be exempt from pre-approval requirements. Specifically, any conference, training, seminar, or meeting regarding scientific, professional, technical, mechanical, trade, clerical, fiscal, administrative, or other fields which will improve individual and organizational performance and assist in achieving the agency's mission and performance goals is considered "training" and is not subject to OMB M-12-12 or CICA Section 3003. Attendance or sponsorship of these types of trainings does NOT require approval as described in Section 5 of this Bulletin; however, they may be reportable under the Farm Bill, as described in Section 7 of this Bulletin.

Conference/Training Attendance Approval Exception

In order to qualify for this exception the travel authorization must clearly show that conference attendance is required for professional development and/or meeting performance goals as shown in [Exhibit 7](#).

Conference/Training Sponsorship Approval Exception

Any REE agency planning to sponsor a conference or training event under this exception must notify the Agency Head's office via memorandum. A copy of the memorandum should be forwarded to the Agency Travel Office (ERS, NASS) or ARS Travel Policy and Systems Branch (TPSB) (ARS, NIFA), no additional approval is required.

The memorandum should include a description of the event and explanation regarding how the conference/training will improve individual and organizational performance and assist in achieving the agency's mission and performance goals. The memorandum should include the following attachments:

- A completed Location Cost Comparison Worksheet ([Exhibit 4](#)), no cost comparison is required if more than 50 percent of the participants are from the location of the conference
- Tentative attendee list, including invited participants from other agencies or outside sources ([Exhibit 3](#))
- Tentative agenda

5. Conference Approval Requirements

Except as described in Section 4 of this Bulletin, all conference attendance and conference sponsorship requires prior approval. The net event cost determines the level of approval

required. For approval purposes net costs include per diem, transportation (including air, rail, POV, rental car, shuttles, etc), and conference registration fees.

Net Conference Cost	Approving Official
> \$450,000	Secretary Of Agriculture
\$75,000 < \$450,000	Deputy Secretary of Agriculture
\$40,000 < \$75,000	REE Undersecretary
\$10,000 < \$40,000	As appropriate: ARS Administrator ERS Administrator NASS Administrator NIFA Director
<\$10,000	No Additional approval required

Conference Attendance Approvals

The Agency travel office will issue a data call for known conferences. The travel office will calculate the estimated net cost using information from the data call and coordinate the appropriate approval.

Requests submitted for approval must include:

- Tentative attendee list, including invited participants from other agencies or outside sources ([Exhibit 3](#))

Conference Sponsorship Approvals

Requests must be submitted to the Agency travel office at least 90 days prior to the event start date and include:

- A completed Location Cost Comparison Worksheet ([Exhibit 4](#)), no cost comparison is required if more than 50 percent of the participants are from the location of the conference
- A completed Hosted Event Approval Request ([Exhibit 5](#)), including a unique accounting code to track cost for all hosted conferences over \$7,000.
 - ARS- Contact the Business Service Center Budget and Fiscal Officer.
 - ERS- Contact the ERS Budget Office.
 - NASS- Contact the Budget & Administration Services Office.
 - NIFA- Contact the NIFA Budget Office.
- Tentative attendee list, including invited participants from other agencies or outside sources ([Exhibit 3](#))
- Tentative agenda

6. Agency-specific procedures

ARS

The sponsoring group should direct requests for approval to the Chief, TPSB. A cover letter signed by the appropriate Area Director, Administrative and Financial Management Division Director, Office of Administrator Staff Office Director, or Director, National Agricultural Library, must accompany the request. TPSB will coordinate the appropriate approval. If the conference approval is granted, it will be the sponsoring organization's servicing budget offices' (SBO) responsibility to set up a unique Funded Program and Shorthand Code in the official accounting system, the Financial Management Modernization Initiative (FMMI), using the format below.

Funded Program:

AR.CT.XXXX.01.YYYZ

AR=Agricultural Research Service

CT=Conference Travel

XXXX=forth level mode code of sponsoring or hosting organization

01=constant place holder

YYYZ=sequential numbering based on the SBO's internal procedures

Shorthand Code:

301-XXXX-YYY

3 (first digit) =Fiscal year indicator

01 (2nd and 3rd digit) = Fund indicator, i.e. 01 Base, 08 Reimbursable, etc.

XXXX = Forth level mode code, same as the Funded Program

YYY= sequential numbering base on the SBO's internal procedures, same as Funded Program

All expenses, (travel, room rental, equipment rental, etc.) related to the approved conference must be charged to the code established above. Therefore, it will be necessary to get these codes established as early in the process as possible. It will also be the SBO and the sponsoring organization's responsibility to work out the funding arrangements in terms of fund transfers in Agricultural Research Information System (if necessary) to establish the financial plans for these conference accounts in CRIS Allocation Tracking System.

ARS Travel Ceilings

All conference travel will be counted against the sponsoring or hosting organizations travel ceilings. It will be up to the hosting organization to work with area leadership to negotiate adjustments to their specific travel ceiling amounts to compensate for ARS travelers attending from other units, areas or organizations. All non-ARS attendee travel will count against the sponsoring organizations travel ceiling.

ERS

Direct requests for approval to the Agency Administrator; a cover letter signed by the Division Director or Director, Administrative and Financial Services, must accompany the request.

Funded Program:

ER.CT.4001.00

ER=Economic Research Service

CT=Conference Travel

4001=Division sponsoring or hosting organization

00=constant place holder

Shorthand Code:

3114001

3 (first digit) =Fiscal year indicator

1 (2nd and 3rd digit) = Fund indicator, i.e. 01 Base, 08 Reimbursable, etc.

1 = Division Identifier

4001 = Division Account Identifier

NASS

Direct requests for approval to the Agency Administrator; a cover letter signed by the Deputy Administrator for Programs & Products or the Deputy Administrator for Field Operations must accompany the request. It is the SBO's and sponsoring organization's responsibility to set up a unique Funded Program and Shorthand Code in the official accounting system, FMMI, using the format below.

Funded Program:

NS.CT.XXXX.01

NS=National Agricultural Statistics Service

CT=Conference Travel

XXXX=forth level mode code of sponsoring or hosting organization

01=constant place holder

Shorthand Code:

3.XXX.YYYY

3 (first digit) =Fiscal year indicator

XXX=Division code (3 digit code)

YYYY=Program Code

All expenses, (travel, room rental, equipment rental, etc.) related to the approved conference must be charged to the code established above. Therefore, it will be necessary to get these codes established as early in the process as possible.

NIFA

The NIFA Institute/Office organizing the conference should send a direct request for approval to the NIFA Budget Office. The NIFA Budget Office will coordinate within the Office of the Director to obtain agency approval. If the conference approval is granted, it will be the sponsoring Institute/Office's responsibility to request a unique Shorthand Code in the official accounting system, FMMI, using the format below. The request for the new Shorthand Code should be sent to the National Capital Region Business Service Center (NCRBSC), Budget & Fiscal Office. The NCRBSC, Budget & Fiscal Office would then set up the new Shorthand Code in the official accounting system, FMMI, using the format below.

Shorthand Code:

300-XXXX-YYY

3 (first digit) =Fiscal year indicator

00 (2nd and 3rd digit)

The rest of the code would be assigned by the NIFA Budget Office.

All expenses, (travel, room rental, equipment rental, etc.) related to the approved conference must be charged to the code established above. Therefore, it will be necessary to get these codes established as early in the process as possible. It will also be the sponsoring Institute/Office's responsibility to work out the funding arrangements in terms of the financial plans for these conference accounts in NATS.

7. Conference Reporting

To ensure that travel authorizations provide sufficient information to generate conference reports, Research, Education, and Economic travelers/travel arrangers will enter information into the ETS as illustrated in [Exhibit 6](#).

Continuous Reporting to OCFO

Within 15 calendar days of the final date of a hosted conferences' occurrence, where the conference's net expenses to USDA exceed \$20,000, the agency Senior Accountable Travel Official (SATO) shall submit a completed Agency Individual Conference Reporting Template to the Office of the CFO (OCFO) and OIG.

Quarterly and Annual Reporting

Not later than 30 calendar days from the last day of each fiscal quarter, the SATO shall provide and certify to OCFO a quarterly report of conferences where net expenses exceeded \$7,000. All conference attendance, regardless of whether the event is agency sponsored or sponsored by an outside entity, must be reported.

8. Responsibilities

REE Mission Area Under Secretary

The REE Under Secretary has the authority to approve conference attendance and event sponsorship with a net cost of \$75,000 or less and may delegate approval of events with a net cost of \$40,000 or less.

Agency Head

The Agency Head has the authority to approve conference attendance and event sponsorship with a net cost of \$40,000 or less, if approval has been delegated in writing by the REE Mission Area Under Secretary.

The Agency Head will appoint a SATO. The responsibilities should be fulfilled by a position such as Deputy Administrator for Management, the CFO, Deputy Director of a Staff Office, and/or equivalent positions

SATO

The SATO will design a records management methodology to maintain all correspondence related to a conference and be able to quickly correlate financial and non-financial records.

The SATO will design and document the internal controls and cost tracking procedures to ensure accurate and timely reporting. The internal controls shall be tested annually to assess control design and operating effectiveness and the reports required by this section shall be considered key financial reports under Appendix A "Internal Control over Financial Reporting" of Office of Management and Budget Circular A-123 "Management's Responsibility for Internal Control."

The SATO will ensure submission of all reports as required.

TPSB

The ARS TPSB is responsible for policy associated with the review and approval process for both conference attendance and conference sponsorship, and post conference reporting policy. TPSB is also responsible for submitting ARS and NIFA final conference reports to the ARS/NIFA SATO for certification.

9. Authorities

[5 U.S.C. §4104 \(4\)](#)

[Federal Travel Regulation \(FTR\)](#)

[OMB, M-12-12, Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations](#)

[Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013 \(CFCA\)](#)

[Departmental Manual 2300-001, Agriculture Travel Regulation \(ATR\)](#)

10. Definitions

Conference

The FTR defines a conference as a meeting, retreat, seminar, symposium or event that involves attendee travel. Specifically,

Travel performed in connection with a prearranged meeting

- that is held for consultation, education, awareness, or discussion; and
- involves costs associated with travel and lodging for some participants; and
- does not include any training program that is continuing education or a curriculum-based educational program, provided that such training program is held independent of a conference of a non-governmental organization.

11. Exhibits

To view each Exhibit please click on the following links:

- [EXHIBIT 1 – OMB M-12-12](#)
- [EXHIBIT 2 – CFCA Section 3003](#)
- [EXHIBIT 3 – Attendee Detail Worksheet](#)
- [EXHIBIT 4 – Location Cost Comparison Worksheet](#)
- [EXHIBIT 5 – Hosted Event Approval Request](#)
- [EXHIBIT 6 – Agency Individual Conference Reporting Template](#)
- [EXHIBIT 7 – GovTrip Guide](#)

/s/

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