United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, D.C. 20240

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Memorandum

To: Solicitor
Assistant Secretaries
Inspector General

From: Robert J. Lamb
Deputy Assistant Secretary - Budget and Finance

Subject: Policy on Conferences and Meetings Involving Travel

The purpose of this memorandum is to establish Departmental policy for planning conferences and meetings when the majority of the participants are in temporary duty travel status. The policy identifies the requirements for planning conferences and meetings, addresses the requirements for serving light refreshments, and deals with the attendance of Departmental employees at conferences sponsored by others. The policy established in this memorandum implements the authority provided in Amendment 89 to the Federal Travel Regulation. The primary objective of Amendment 89 is to promote a business-like approach to conference planning and to reduce agency costs by easing related administrative burdens.

The Department's policy dealing with these areas is summarized below, followed by a more detailed explanation in a question and answer format in Attachment I.:

For Departmental Conferences or meetings involving <u>30 or more</u> attendees (when a majority of the participants will be in a temporary duty travel status):

A. <u>Conference Planning Requirement</u> - Appendix E of Amendment 89 will be used as the standard guide for planning Departmental conferences. The guide describes all the necessary steps in this process, including the development of conference specifications, establishing a budget, selecting a site, providing food and drink, registration, etc. Appendix E can be accessed using the internet address cited in the attachment.

B. <u>Conference Lodging Allowance</u> - The "conference lodging allowance", which represents an allowance of up to 125 percent of the maximum GSA lodging rate for the selected location, may be authorized for qualifying conferences and meetings sponsored by the Department. This allowance is also authorized for Departmental employees attending conferences sponsored by others, when the conference sponsor determines that the higher lodging rate is necessary.

C. Light Refreshments - Light refreshments can be served when prudent, consistent with the requirements described in Attachment I.

This policy is intended to provide a sound and consistent basis for planning all Interior-sponsored conferences and meetings. Should you have additional questions or require additional information regarding this matter, please contact Sky Lesher, Director of the Office of Financial Management, on (202) 208-4701.

Attachment

cc: Heads of Bureaus and Offices
Bureau Chief Financial Officers

Department of the Interior Travel Policy
Supplemental Implementing Instructions to
Federal Travel Regulation Amendment 89 (41 CFR 301-74)
Conference Planning

The policies contained in this memorandum, the FTR, and other Interior-specific implementing guidance will be posted/linked to Interior's "Federal Travel Regulation Implementing Instructions" website at:

http://www.doi.gov/pfm/travel.html.

I. General Information

1. What constitutes a "conference" in the context of the policy?

A conference is a meeting, retreat, seminar, symposium or event that requires attendees to travel away from their duty station and be placed in an authorized per diem status. The term "conference" also applies to training activities that are considered to be conferences under 5 CFR 410.404. This is the definition provided in Appendix E to Chapter 301 of the Federal Travel Regulation (FTR). See 41 CFR Chapter 301, Appendix E.

2. Who is delegated the authority to approve conferences or meetings involving 30 or more employees?

A conference involving 30 or more employees must be approved by the Program Assistant Secretary. This authority may be delegated not lower than the Deputy Assistant Secretary level or equivalent (Part 205 Departmental Manual Subchapter 15.6).

3. What is the standard conference planning guide to be used in Interior?

Appendix E to 41 CFR Chapter 301 is the standard conference planning guide. Another method may be used only upon the written approval of the sponsoring office's Assistant Secretary. The authority to use another conference planning method may be delegated not lower than the Deputy Assistant Secretary level or equivalent.

II. Departmental Policy on the use of the Conference Lodging Allowance (CLA) Established in the FTR

1. Under what circumstances will Interior approve the use of the CLA?

The intent of the CLA is to help defray total conference or meeting costs whereby a particular site chosen for the conference will need to use a large portion of the conference or meeting facility, making it uneconomical for the hotel or facility to offer the normal government lodging rates. For Interior's conference planning purposes, a conference of 30 or more attendees may justify using the CLA.

However, the CLA will not be permitted for a conference sponsored or co-sponsored by Interior and attended by fewer than 30 participants. When Interior is not a co-sponsor and a sponsoring or co-sponsoring Federal agency sponsor has determined that the payment of the CLA is required and prudent, the Interior employees attending the conference will be authorized the CLA. Also, a travel-authorizing official may deem the CLA necessary to defray lodging costs associated with a conference sponsored by a non-Federal source.

2. If there are fewer than 30 participants attending a meeting or conference, can Interior, as a sponsor or co-sponsor, authorize the CLA?

No.

3. May my travel-approving official approve payment of the CLA, if the meeting or conference sponsor has not determined it necessary?

No.

4. May my travel-approving official include the CLA as an authorized allowance on my limited open or open travel authorization?

No, the CLA must be authorized on a trip-by-trip basis.

5. May I use my limited open or open travel authorization to a attend a conference away from my duty station?

No, attendance at conferences must be authorized on a trip-by-trip basis.

6. Does the CLA include an increase in the M&IE allowance?

No, the CLA applies only to the cost of lodging.

7. What is the maximum CLA that can be authorized?

The CLA may not exceed 125 percent of the lodging portion of the established GSA locality per diem rate.

8. Does the CLA include lodging taxes?

No, lodging taxes are not included in the CLA unless the meeting or conference is being held at a foreign location.

9. Does the 50 mile limit apply for temporary duty travel to conferences or meetings?

Generally, yes. You will not receive per diem if your temporary duty is within 50 miles of your duty station or your residence. However, your authorizing official may reduce that limit down to 30 miles, under certain circumstances, for attendance at a conference. Please refer to 347 DM 301-11.1.

III. Departmental Policy on Light Refreshments at Conferences or Meetings

1. What are Interior's requirements that must be met before light refreshments may be provided at an approved Interior-sponsored meeting or conference under the FTR where a fee is not charged to cover the administrative cost?

The following requirements must be met before refreshments may be provided under this authority:

- The conference or meeting must be approved by an Assistant Secretary or his/her deputy or equivalent (205 DM 15.6);
- Conference or meeting attendees must only be Government employees (see minor exception in the answer to question 2 below);
- There must be at least 30 attendees at the conference or meeting; and
- A majority of the attendees must be in a travel status.

2. May light refreshments be provided for a Government sponsored meeting or conference when the attendees include both Federal and non-Federal personnel?

As a general rule, Federal agencies are not to provide light refreshments at conferences or meetings where there are non-Federal attendees -- unless the cost of providing the refreshments was included in a registration fee that will recover the cost. An exception to this general rule will apply in situations where a small number of non-federal participants are requested to speak, or otherwise actively participate in, the conference or meeting, at the invitation of the Department. In such instances, when it was determined during the conference planning process that providing light refreshments was prudent -- then all participants can partake.

3. May refreshments be provided free to employees in a travel status, while charging a fee to employees who are not in a travel status?

No. If the conference or meeting otherwise qualifies for light refreshments, these are to be provided to all attendees (without additional cost).

4. What is the maximum amount that may be spent for refreshments on a daily basis if light refreshments are allowed?

The maximum amount spent for light refreshments may not exceed 30% of the M&IE rate per day for each attendee at the conference or meeting.

5. What is the minimum documentation required to support providing light refreshments at a meeting or conference?

The minimum documentation to support furnishing refreshments include:

A. A copy of the Assistant Secretary's approval to hold the meeting or conference including the determination that providing refreshments was prudent; and
B. An attendance log showing the name and duty station of each attendee.

IV. Departmental Policy on Meals and Incidental Expenses When Attending a Conference or Meeting

1. Does the approval of the CLA or the provision of light refreshments at a conference or meeting affect an employee's entitlement to M&IE allowance?

No.

2. What if an employee has special dietary requirements for meals?

When a conference facility knows in advance that an attendee has special dietary needs, the facility will make special arrangements to accommodate that attendee.

3. If the conference lodging rate includes a complimentary snack or continental breakfast, does the M&IE allowance have to be reduced?

No, the M&IE allowance is not reduced when a complimentary snack or continental breakfast is made available.

General Services Administration
Frequently Asked Questions

1. Does the Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) cover conferences?

Yes, the FTR now covers travel-related expenses involving conferences for Federal employees. If there is no travel involved on behalf of the Federal host or attendees of the conference, then the FTR does not apply. If there is travel related to the conferences, then the FTR applies for the Federal participants.

2. What changes have been made to the FTR regarding conferences?

The FTR has recently been amended (January 10, 2000 - Amendment #89) to expand the portion regarding conferences. See Part 301-74--major revisions include:

- Expanded guidance on how to plan a conference is provided to Federal conference planners.
- Emphasis is still on the lowest overall cost to the Government.
- The Government can now pay for light refreshments at breaks during a conference.
- Federal travelers can be reimbursed up to 25 percent more than the established lodging per diem rate if needed for the conference. This is referred to as the conference lodging allowance (CLA).

3. If I am having a conference or meeting with just people in the local commuting area, can the Government pay for the light refreshments?

No, not by using the FTR. The payment for breaks allowed in the FTR applies only to conferences, meetings, etc, that involve travel.

4. Does this guidance apply to "on site" conferences in Government provided facilities?

We have not differentiated as to where the conference/meeting is held. The principal criterion is that the attendees have to be in travel status, as the authority is under the FTR. The meeting can be at a hotel, at a convention center, or at another location (including a Federal building) if the attendees are in travel status.

5. Do you have to have at least one employee in travel status at the meeting to allow light refreshments?

The majority of the attendees have to be in travel status. If the majority are not, then the rule doesn't apply. We have not made it mandatory that every attendee has to be in travel status, as that would not be practical at every conference/meeting. It would not be in the Government's best

interests to not allow Non-travel attendees to participate in the break (forcing them to go elsewhere for refreshments) or to collect funds from just certain attendees and keep the appropriate records of those
funds.

6. It appears from the definition for conference (Appendix E to the FTR) that staff or working meetings can fall within this guidance. Is this true?

We have intentionally allowed the definition to cover conferences, meetings, workshops, etc. We wanted to give the maximum flexibility to the agencies to make decisions that are in the best interests of the Government. As you notice, we have not set a minimum as to the number of attendees (other than records need to be kept for groups of 30 or more). We expect that the agencies themselves will monitor this usage and ensure that the rule is not violated. Again, the principal criterion is that the majority of attendees have to be in travel status.

7. The amendment states that agencies may provide light refreshments to agency employees attending official conferences. The amendment also states that 5 U.S.C. 5702 authorizes the refreshments. Does the amendment permit agencies to provide refreshments to employees who are not in travel status?

The FTR covers **only** individuals in a travel status. An agency can determine that it is prudent to allow attendees not in a travel status to partake in the breaks where light refreshments are provided to ensure that the integrity and continuity of the conference would not be seriously hampered or disrupted if those attendees were forced to obtained refreshments elsewhere. In addition, the agency could determine that the administrative burden of monitoring refreshments to ensure only travelers partake is so costly and inefficient that such costs outweigh the cost of providing refreshments. If an agency is concerned about the legality of providing such refreshments, then the agency has the ability to say no to providing the breaks. It is the agency's decision. However, agencies may not provide light refreshments to non-federal travelers unless there is a mechanism for them to pay the cost of providing such refreshments, such as a registration fee.

8. The amendment discusses making refreshments available "at cost" if they are not included in a fee. What does GSA mean by fee? The cost of the contract? The registration fee? Does this imply that some employees are expected to pay for refreshments out of pocket while others are reimbursed by the Government?

The intent of this guidance (which is in the Appendix E) is to indicate what an agency may do if it elects not to pay for breaks. If an agency pays for the break, we assume that it will recover its expenditure in the registration fee. If an agency elects not to pay for a break, then any break expenses would not be in the registration fee. We would hope that an agency hosting the conference would try to get the property to provide light refreshments at "cost" or at a discount through its regular snack shop, restaurant, etc. in order to minimize impact upon the attendees. Again this is part of Appendix E and is offered as "Suggested Guidance". It is not mandatory - it is only intended to help out a conference planner.

9. When I attend a conference which includes lunch, it may be necessary to skip lunch for health reasons or because I'm eating elsewhere due to official business. Will I be reimbursed for a replacement lunch?

No. Conference attendees' travel costs include attendees' subsistence expenses (including lodging and meals and incidental expenses (M&IE)) and transportation costs authorized at Government expense. It is the policy of the Government that agencies shall exercise strict fiscal responsibility by selecting conference sites that minimize, among other things, conference attendees' travel costs. Most normally, a reduced lunch has been prearranged as part of the agency's negotiation with the conference facility. When a conference facility knows in advance that an attendee has special health/medical needs, the facility will make special arrangements to accommodate that attendee.

10. Does the requirement to book lodging accommodations through my agency's travel management system (TMS) apply when attending a conference where the conference sponsor has blocked rooms at one or more lodging facilities?

The requirement to book lodging accommodations through an agency TMS does not apply when a conference sponsor has negotiated with one or more lodging facilities to set aside a specific number of rooms for conference attendees. To ensure that the set aside rooms are used, direct booking, by attendees, with the lodging facility is required. Consequently use of a TMS is not mandatory.