



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

NOV 19 2014

DECISION MEMORANDUM

To: Secretary

Through: Elizabeth Klein, Associate Deputy Secretary 

From: Kristen J. Sarri, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget 

Subject: Waiver Request: 2014 American Geophysical Union Fall Meeting

RECOMMENDATION

The USGS participation in the 2014 American Geophysical Union Fall Meeting at the requested level is vital to ensuring timely delivery of our cutting edge science and incorporation of the newest advances by other world class scientists and institutions into bureau research. The Bureau has exercised stringent management controls to reduce overall conference attendance and expenses and certifies strict adherence to all Federal Travel Regulations (FTR) and to all Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR). In addition to the FTR and FAR, the Department's review of the attendance request includes an evaluation of GSA lodging and per diem rates, speakers' fees, unusual or questionable costs, conference activities, and agenda. Overall, the AGU Fall Meeting provides substantial professional value at a reasonable cost. We recommend your approval of this waiver.

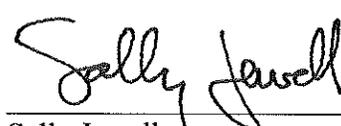
SECRETARY'S DECISION

APPROVE

DISAPPROVE

DISCUSS

Date: NOV 25 2014


Sally Jewell



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

NOV 19 2014

DECISION MEMORANDUM

To: Secretary

Through: Elizabeth Klein, Associate Deputy Secretary 

From: Kristen Sarri, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget 

Subject: Waiver Request: 2014 American Geophysical Union Fall Meeting

INTRODUCTION

This memorandum seeks your approval for a waiver to allow Department of the Interior (Department) scientists to attend the 2014 American Geophysical Union (AGU) Fall Meeting in San Francisco, California, December 15-19, 2014. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines state that Federal agencies are not to incur expenses from their own funds in excess of \$500,000 for a single conference. However, the Secretary may provide a waiver from this policy if exceptional circumstances exist whereby spending in excess of \$500,000 is the most cost-effective option to achieve the program purpose. The circumstances for requesting this waiver are documented below.

BACKGROUND

The Department conference approval process, which complies with OMB guidance, requires a detailed review by the Deputy Secretary for all conferences that are estimated to cost in excess of \$100,000. The Deputy Secretary has been conducting reviews of conference approval requests since May 2012.

Since the implementation of this policy, the Department has granted two waivers to the USGS for conference spending in excess of \$500,000—both for the AGU Fall Meeting. The first waiver was granted for the 2012 Fall Meeting (December 3-7, 2012) with estimated costs at \$560,262. The second waiver was granted for the 2013 Fall Meeting (December 9-13, 2013) with estimated costs at \$817,659.

The Department's policies and procedures incorporate OMB guidance and are consistent with the President's Executive Order 13589 – Promoting Efficient Spending, and OMB memorandums M-11-35 and M-12-12. The Department's policies provide a framework of internal controls designed to mitigate risks associated with conference planning and spending, and ensure compliance with Federal Travel Regulations (FTR). Our most current policy incorporates guidance on conference sponsorships, cost comparisons, and adherence to per diem limits.

American Geophysical Union Fall Meeting

The AGU Fall meeting is an externally hosted conference and is the largest worldwide conference in the geophysical sciences, attracting more than 24,000 Earth and space scientists, educators, students, and other leaders, including government and industry, from around the world. For many years, this meeting has served as the primary venue for USGS scientists to connect with colleagues, broaden their knowledge base, meet with collaborators from distant locations, and reduce the need for additional domestic and international travel.

The USGS scientists play an important role in the success of the AGU Fall Meeting and USGS stakeholders expect a broad presence and strong participation by USGS. Over the 47-year history of the AGU, USGS attendees have presented keynote addresses, organized sessions, taught short courses, and shared scientific findings at sessions and workshops. The USGS scientists also serve as officers in the AGU and other international research organizations that hold science and business meetings in conjunction with the AGU Fall Meeting. Several USGS scientists will be receiving awards and formal recognition for their work at this year's meeting.

For early career scientists, it is important they attend to gain knowledge and experience from more senior scientists both within and outside the USGS. The meeting provides young scientists with exposure and an opportunity to expand their professional networks, discuss their work, consider opportunities for collaboration, find mentors, mentor others, and form professional relationships that promote the future of their research.

The AGU Fall Meeting provides USGS science leadership with the single most cost-effective means of meeting and interacting with USGS scientists they support and mentor, as well as students and post-doctorates seeking career opportunities with the USGS. More new and early-career USGS scientists have been invited to present than in past years. Many USGS scientists deferred participation in other conferences in favor of attending the AGU Fall Meeting as the most comprehensive and significant forum this year. This meeting will be the only opportunity this year for many USGS scientists to share the results of their research with their national and international colleagues. Thus, USGS planned attendance at the 2014 AGU Fall Meeting is greater than in 2012 and 2013.

THE ISSUE

The USGS estimates that costs to attend the AGU Fall Meeting will be \$941,350. This estimated cost exceeds the OMB and Department guidance limiting an agency from spending more than \$500,000 for a single conference. The importance of USGS attendance at the AGU Fall Meeting to the USGS is well established and is critical to the Agency mission. In order for the USGS to maintain its reputation and role as a leader in the Earth science community, to advance Bureau science, and to support the development of USGS scientists, attendance at the requested level has been determined to be the most cost-effective means to achieve these important objectives. Approval of a waiver to allow the USGS attendance at the AGU Fall Meeting at the requested level would support the Bureau mission and help preserve the Agency's leadership role in Earth science.

Importance of USGS Involvement

USGS scientists have been attending the AGU Fall Meeting for nearly 50 years. The science covered in this year's AGU meeting ties directly to all of the USGS Mission Areas: Climate and Land-Use Change, Core Science Systems, Ecosystems, Energy and Minerals, Environmental Health, Natural Hazards, and Water. The AGU focus areas include:

- Biogeochemistry and carbon cycle research
- Biological oceanography
- Earth and planetary surface processes
- Earth and space science informatics
- Geomagnetism and paleomagnetism
- Global environmental change and paleoclimatology
- Hydrology
- Marine geology and geophysics
- Mineral and rock physics
- Natural hazards
- Seismology and geodesy
- Volcanology, geochemistry, and petrology

Additionally, this year the USGS submitted a request for a special session at AGU entitled, "The Role of the U.S Geological Survey in Today's World: Perspectives from Past and Present USGS Directors." This session is intended to address the following question: Today, as the planet faces a daunting combination of Earth system science-related issues, how can and should the USGS address these challenges? A distinguished panel including both the current Acting USGS Director and past USGS Directors will present their perspectives on the role and position of the USGS in the current and future global society. This session is sponsored by the USGS John Wesley Powell Center for Earth System Science Analysis and Synthesis, the Geological Society of America, and the Ecological Society of America.

ANALYSIS AND POSITION OF INTERESTED PARTIES

The USGS is proposing to send 559 USGS scientists and managers to attend the AGU Fall Meeting; 153 of the attendees are local. Estimated travel costs are \$941,350 to be funded from appropriated funds and reimbursable funds that the USGS receives from other agencies. Sponsorship costs (exhibit booth) are \$3,700. These costs and attendance levels are compared with the 2012 and 2013 AGU meetings in the following table:

AGU Fall Meeting Conference Cost Comparison

	2012	2013	2014
Number of USGS attendees	505	538	559
Total appropriated funding	\$524,448	\$663,749	\$678,170
Total reimbursable funding	\$107,102	\$150,110	\$259,480
*Sponsorship	\$5,540	\$3,800	\$3,700
Total costs	\$637,000	\$817,659	\$941,350
Average cost per person	\$1,250	\$1,513	\$1,677

Average per person cost is \$164 higher than in 2013

(*Sponsorship cost is not included in average cost per person calculation.)

With the current number of USGS attendees, the cost for this meeting is such that attendance would need to be cut substantially to keep costs below the \$500,000 threshold. Reducing attendance would negatively affect the dissemination of our scientific information by delaying presentations and collecting peer feedback and collaboration.

Nearly one-fourth of the scientists attending are from the San Francisco commuting area. Because these and other staff members would need to recoup the mission-critical functions listed above, they would need to travel at times other than the AGU meeting to meet with other agency colleagues and scientists. Thus, the overall travel costs for the Bureau would likely be considerably higher for those individuals who do not attend the AGU. If their science centers or programs are unable to shoulder the burden of significantly higher travel costs, the science mission will be adversely impacted. Therefore, it is not simultaneously possible to minimize overall travel costs and avoid the Secretarial waiver.

In addition to the increase in the proposed number of attendees, factors that contribute to this year's higher per-person costs and the overall conference costs include: (1) a \$10 per person increase for AGU conference registration fees; (2) a \$37 per person per day increase in the Federal Government per diem lodging costs for San Francisco; and (3) a general increase in average airfare costs per person. These factors result in an overall increase of \$15,105 in registration fees and an overall increase of \$79,822 for lodging expenses accounting for an approximate increase of \$164 per person from 2013.

Over the past 3 years, the USGS has exercised such stringent oversight of conference attendance that for many of its scientists, the AGU Fall Meeting now constitutes the only forum in which they can engage with their peers in the scientific discourse necessary to advance their latest research.

Overall USGS conference expenses for FY 2014 remained 35 percent less than pre-Sequestration levels. Bureau conference travel costs for FY 2012 through FY 2014 are compared below. This data is consistent with the Federal Government's Campaign to Cut Waste, as well as conservative management of Bureau conference attendance and expenses.

	2012		2013		2014	
	Trips	Cost	Trips	Costs	Trips	Costs
Q1	1,563	\$2,289,463	1,388	\$ 1,887,792	739	\$1,066,411
Q2	859	\$1,057,179	603	\$ 753,617	664	\$ 705,563
Q3	1,370	\$1,791,348	261	\$ 303,542	1,037	\$1,363,649
Q4	1,101	\$1,815,783	383	\$ 505,190	974	\$1,376,274
TOTAL	4,893	\$6,953,773	2,635	\$ 3,450,141	3,414	\$4,511,897

Data represents conference related travel costs from the CGE database.

The USGS recognizes that this request represents a large number of scientists proposed for attendance. As explained above, the AGU Fall Meeting is uniquely essential to this cadre of USGS scientists because of its mission critical subject matter and the participation by top-notch scientific colleagues from around the Nation and the world, and because there is no other venue that provides the same opportunity for scientific learning and advancement in support of the USGS mission.

Under these circumstances, USGS participation in this meeting has been pared back to the minimum level possible, without serious risk both to the USGS's reputation as a leader in the Earth science community and to USGS science itself. At an average cost of \$1,677 per person, attendance at this meeting is the most efficient use of the scientists' time and Federal funding for the value provided to the science from any meeting that USGS scientists attend. Reimbursable funds for this meeting, which are significantly higher this year, are provided to USGS scientists by partners and stakeholders who so value USGS participation that they are willing to bear the costs.

The following criteria were applied to prioritize selection of meeting attendees:

- Officers in the AGU
- Session chairs
- Keynote speakers
- Presenters
- Committee organizers
- Instructors at the conference
- Those having a leadership role in their science area
- Early career scientists

In addition, many senior managers have not been chosen to attend in favor of sending younger scientists who are presenting papers. Some scientists have also asked non-USGS colleagues to present their portion of their science, further reducing USGS attendance and costs.

RECOMMENDATION

The USGS participation in the 2014 AGU Fall Meeting at the requested level is vital to ensuring timely delivery of our cutting edge science and incorporation of the newest advances by other world class scientists and institutions into Bureau research. The Bureau has exercised stringent management controls to reduce overall conference attendance and expenses and certifies strict adherence to all FTR (for conference attendance) and to all FAR (for conference sponsorship). In addition to the FTR and FAR, the Department's review of the attendance request includes an evaluation of GSA lodging and per diem rates, speakers' fees, unusual or questionable costs, and conference activities and agenda. Overall, the AGU Fall Meeting provides substantial professional value at a reasonable cost. We recommend your approval of this waiver.

cc: Chief of Staff
Assistant Secretary for Water and Science
Acting Director, USGS