

November 5, 2012

DECISION MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY

THROUGH: David Hayes, Deputy Secretary

FROM: Pam Haze, Deputy Assistant Secretary –Budget, Finance, Performance and Acquisition

CC: Laura Davis, Anne Castle

SUBJECT: AGU Fall Meeting Wavier

I. INTRODUCTION

Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance on conferences requires a Secretarial waiver on all conferences that are expected to cost in excess of \$500,000. This memorandum requests your approval on a waiver to allow Department of Interior (DOI) scientists to attend the Fall Meeting of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) – the largest meeting of geoscientists on the planet. This event is the most important meeting of the year for the USGS. Attendance helps ensure the quality of the science that informs DOI management and policy decisions. In addition, it allows the US Geological Survey (USGS) to communicate the latest results of our science to partners and colleagues, and helps ensure coordination while avoiding duplication in our science programs. Costs for the meeting are estimated to be \$560,000 from federal sources (\$460,000 from the DOI) with an additional \$107,000 from other non-federal sources. The costs for the AGU meeting are \$1,076 per person or \$215 per person/per day. For comparison, the “now famous” GSA Las Vegas conference costs were \$2,700 per person and \$600 per person/per day. These costs are broken down as:

USGS appropriated	\$430,000
Other DOI appropriated	\$ 30,000
Other Federal agencies appropriated	\$100,000
Reimbursable	<u>\$107,000</u>
Total funding	\$667,000

This funding would permit 520 DOI scientists to attend the AGU meeting - Five hundred five (505) from USGS and fifteen (15) from other DOI bureaus.

II. BACKGROUND

Our conference approval process, which complies with the latest direction from the OMB, requires a line-by-line approval by the Deputy Secretary for all conferences that are estimated to cost in excess of \$100,000. David Hayes has been conducting line-by-line reviews since the most recent guidance was released on May 11, 2012.

OMB guidance also says that agencies are not to incur expenses from their own funds greater than \$500,000 for a single conference, but that the Secretary may provide a waiver from this policy if he determines that exceptional circumstances exist whereby spending in excess of \$500,000 is the most cost-effective option to achieve the program purpose. The basis for the waiver is to be documented.

III. Fall Meeting of the American Geophysical Union

The Fall Meeting of the AGU (December 3-7, 2012), with more than 20,000 registered participants from academia, government, and industry, is the premier venue in the geosciences for exchange of the most up-to-date scientific information prior to publication of scientific research and analysis, which often lags presentation at AGU by months to a year or more. The event provides five full days of presentations in dozens of concurrent sessions that run from 8 am to 6 pm each day. Breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and evenings are filled with panel discussions, town hall meetings, committee meetings, and break-out groups during which the business of science is conducted, taking advantage of the fact that nearly all active geoscientists are present in one place at the same time.

The estimated cost of the conference from federal funds is \$560,000 which includes an average registration fee of \$395 per attendee, up to five nights of hotel accommodations at government per diem rates (many attendees do not stay the entire conference), and transportation to the host city of San Francisco. We have kept total costs of the meeting as low as possible by taking advantage, where reasonable and appropriate, of non-federal reimbursable dollars (\$107,000) to fund travel and registration fees – 17 percent of the total is supported in this manner. Some of the meeting attendees are within the local area and will not be claiming hotel or per diem, also keeping meeting costs low. On average, the cost per person for this meeting is about \$1,283 (\$667,000/520), making it the most efficient use of the scientist's time and the federal funding for the value to the science of any meeting that the USGS scientists attend.

Last year, USGS sent 560 to the Fall AGU meeting and attendees from other DOI bureaus numbered ten. The number of USGS scientists originally applying to attend the AGU meeting was well over 600. Therefore, in comparison with previous years, the 505 scientists proposed for attendance reflects the fact that USGS has cut back substantially in terms of AGU meeting attendance. Many senior managers have chosen to not attend the meeting in favor of sending their younger scientists who are presenting papers. Some scientists have asked non-USGS colleagues to present their portion of their science, thus reducing USGS costs.

The USGS also removed from consideration those scientists that did not meet the following criteria:

- An officer in the AGU association
- Leading or chairing a session
- A keynote speaker
- Presenting at least one paper or poster

- A committee organizer
- Conducting instruction at the conference
- Having a leadership role in their science area

The following are a few of the mission-critical functions that occur at the AGU Fall Meeting:

- Each scientist presenting a paper receives critical feedback from his/her peers prior to publication on methods/interpretation/applications that improve the quality of the science that helps inform DOI management and decisions. This is particularly true of poster papers that encourage one-on-one discussion.
- Each scientist presenting a paper informs the larger community of partners and stakeholders about the latest in DOI results that will be informing decisions, increasing awareness, acceptance, and buy-in. This is particularly true for orally presented papers which are reserved for more mature work.
- Scientists learn of the latest advances in their fields and allied disciplines that impact their own work, increasing the quality and effectiveness of their own research.
- By attending committee and other side meetings that take place during this conference, numerous separate trips to other venues are avoided, saving both money and time for the government, and increasing the efficiency of how our scientists function.
- By attending the AGU meeting, DOI scientists are viewed as active and essential components of the geosciences community. Currently the AGU President-Elect and three disciplinary section Presidents-Elect are USGS staff members. Such recognition is an important part of the promotion process for these scientists and an important part of the recognition of the quality of USGS science.
- Scientists and program managers are able to meet with counterparts to plan initiatives that cross agency and sector (e.g., private foundation-government) boundaries, thus increasing the sources of funding for important work, promoting constructive collaboration, and broadening the scientific input that solves the problems.
- Many staff members attend workshops during AGU to acquire new scientific skills that help them do their jobs better.

Geoscientists consider the scientific process to consist of formulating a project plan, collecting data in the field or lab, analyzing the data, formulating a hypothesis to explain the results, modeling the results, attending the AGU meeting to present the results to peers, writing the paper, and finally publishing the paper. Attending the AGU is as important a step in the scientific process as data collection. It is what geoscientists must do to be sure that their science is high quality, and it is what they have been doing for 50 years.

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, participation by top-notch scientific colleagues from around the country 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. USGS recognized immediately upon the imposition of federal travel restrictions earlier this year that the greatest challenge would be to the AGU meeting. Although concerted attempts have been made over the past several months to decrease the

overall cost in federal appropriated dollars to less than \$500,000, USGS does not feel that any additional reductions can be made without adversely impacting the overall quality of its scientific endeavors.

IV. DISCUSSION OF OPTIONS

With the current number of USGS and other DOI attendees, the federal cost for this meeting is such that another 35 attendees would need to be cut from the list in order to have the total of all federal costs below the \$500,000 threshold for the meeting to be approved absent a Secretarial waiver. The USGS does have a plan for cutting additional names from the list, but it would affect the dissemination of our scientific information by delaying presentations and collecting peers' feedback and collaboration. Nearly one-third of the scientists attending are from the San Francisco 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 be likely a factor of three or more - higher for those individuals who do not attend the AGU. If their science centers or programs are unable to shoulder the burden of a three-time higher travel cost, the science mission will be adversely impacted. Thus it is not simultaneously possible to minimize overall annual travel costs and avoid the Secretarial waiver.

V. POSITIONS OF INTERESTED PARTIES

This event, as currently budgeted, is just over the OMB guidance to limit conference spending to less than \$500,000 per event if all federal costs are considered. If only DOI costs are considered, it is within the \$500,000 limit. It could be that the federal costs actually come in under the \$500,000 limit, but we felt it wise to apply for a waiver in the event that it does not. Both Department of Energy (DOE - for the Nuclear Materials Management Annual Meeting) and National Institutes of Health (for the Society for Neuroscience) have sought and received Secretarial waivers for scientific conferences over \$500,000 which were of great importance to their missions. The following Federal agencies are processing Secretarial waivers for attendance at AGU: DOE, National Space and Aeronautics Administration (NASA) and Department of Defense. NASA's Administrator and DOE's Secretary are expected to grant the waiver.

We recommend your approval of this waiver.

VI. SECRETARY'S DECISION

- _____ APPROVE
- _____ DISAPPROVE
- _____ OTHER:

*Panel alternative 11-30-12
Secretary approved
earlier*

Comments: