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Road Less Traveled: Reducing Federal Travel & Conference Spending

Witnesses:

The Honorable Rush Holt

Representative for the 12th Congressional District of New Jersey

The Honorable Danny Werfel

Controller, U.S. Office of Management and Budget

Cynthia Metzler

Chief Administrative Officer, U.S. General Services Administration

Committee Members Present:

Blake Farenthold (R-TX), Chairman

Stephen Lynch (D-MA), Ranking Member

Tim Walberg (R-MI)

On February 27, 2013, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform held a hearing to receive testimony assessing government requirements for reducing federal travel and conference spending. In May 2012, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a memo outlined policy changes in response to the General Services Administration (GSA) conference in Las Vegas that cost over \$820,000. OMB is directing federal departments and agencies to cut 30 percent of their fiscal year (FY) 2010 travel and conference spending by FY2013. Additionally, any conference costing over \$100,000 requires senior level approval and the head of an agency must issue a waiver for any over \$500,000.

In his opening statement, Chairman Blake Farenthold (R-TX) described the hearing as “an opportunity to hear how OMB’s directive – if fully and responsibly implemented -- can potentially help save the taxpayer’s billions of dollars.” He stated that the committee hoped to evaluate “if these new policies have curbed wasteful expenditures, and what new statutory changes may be required to reduce travel spending appropriately and to shed greater transparency upon travel and conference spending.” He mentioned the reintroduction of the Government Spending Accountability Act (H.R. 313) to “largely implement the guidelines of the OMB memo.”

Ranking Member Stephen Lynch (D-MA) stated in his opening statement that the federal government “must be a good steward of American tax payer’s money.” He noted the importance of ensuring that “only necessary conferences are held, that only those who need to attend participate, and that there are no improper expenses.”

Representative Rush Holt (D-NJ) focused his testimony on the impact of reduced federal travel and conference spending on the scientific community. He stated that H.R. 313 and the OMB memo “initiate prohibitions and impediments that would hinder American scientists’ ability to collaborate and communicate with scientists at other institutions and laboratories.” He discussed how not only formal and poster presentations “lead to new collaborations that have the promise of new discoveries” but also “informal conversations.” He provided examples of successful collaborations at conferences that have resulted in groundbreaking applications such as cancer treatments. Holt advocated for modifying the bill and memo to “allow further scientific progress.” He noted, “We should be investing more in research and development, which means, of course, investing in scientists, but also investing in their ability to pursue science.” He closed his testimony declaring that “we should be spending more on the conferences like those which promote innovation” as they “are not wasteful spending, but instead are examples of federal investments in innovation and economic development.”

Danny Werfel, controller at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), stated in his testimony that the “Administration has taken a number of aggressive steps to cut waste and modernize government...working to create a government that is more efficient, effective, and accountable to the American people.” OMB seeks to decrease “spending on travel and conferences by making smarter decisions, eliminating unnecessary trips and conferences, and implementing innovative solutions that reduce costs, save time and achieve better results.” He detailed developments at the Department of the Interior: increased use of technology and media for distance meetings at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and increased “use of government vehicles for travel” rather than airlines and hosting of training in-house or at closer locations at the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement. DOI has reduced travel spending by more than \$30 million.

Werfel discussed scientific conferences stating OMB is “aware of the important role travel and conferences can play in carrying out an agency’s mission.” He noted that “a meeting or symposium where scientific experts from the Federal government partner with their private-sector counterparts on critical research” is defined as a conference by the Federal Travel Regulations (FTR). However,

he stated, "I think we all can agree that such activities are neither unnecessary nor wasteful" and "we must...be vigilant in protecting activities that are necessary and vital to our shared priorities as a Nation."

In her testimony, Cynthia Metzler, chief administrative officer at the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), discussed her role in promoting "efficiency within the agency and, in part, [ensuring] that our travel and conference policies have strong controls, effective oversight, and focus on reducing costs." She outlined the changes implemented at GSA following the Las Vegas conference scandal and their efforts to comply with the OMB mandate.

In the question and answer section, Farenthold asked how close government agencies and departments are to achieving the 30 percent reduction in spending. Werfel responded that spending levels are "right in the range" of target levels. He indicated that there is "concern coming from the scientific community" about the critical nature of collaboration in the "advancement of science."

Opening statements, witness testimonies, and an archived webcast of the hearing can be found on the Committee web site.

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