

## **Amendment #793: To apply Commerce, Justice, and Science (CJS) conference accountability standards to the entire bill.**

One area of the federal government that is in dire need of reform is agency conference spending. The federal government spent at least \$2 billion on conferences between 2000 and 2006.<sup>1</sup> This is unacceptable given our current fiscal crisis.

To make matters worse, there is ample evidence that many conferences are more about rest and relaxation than actually improving the agencies performance.

Given the tremendous technological advancements the world has made lately with teleconferences, enabling people to interface directly from around the world, it has greatly negated the need for cost prohibitive expenses that comes with conferences. At a minimum, with the advent of these more efficient communication devices, lavish conferences at exotic locations are certainly not necessary and should be prevented in the future.

Unfortunately, there are still too many unfortunate examples of agency largesse and waste on conference expenses. For example, the Social Security Administration spent \$770,000 on a conference in 2009 at the Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix, Arizona. The three-day conference included private dance recitals, paid motivational speakers, and an optional, non-government-funded casino trip.<sup>2</sup>

It is the responsibility of the U.S. Congress and the managers within federal agencies to exercise due diligence in performing oversight over an area of federal spending, and conference spending is ripe for oversight.

The entire “minibus” bill should emulate the CJS conference accountability sections

Examples such as the one above is why the language in the Commerce, Justice, and Science (CJS) Division of this bill is promising in finally

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<sup>1</sup> David Fredosso, *The Washington Examiner*, —*Government Conference Spending Gone Wild!*, August 25, 2009, <http://washingtonexaminer.com/blogs/beltway-confidential/2009/08/government-conference-spending-gone-wild>.

<sup>2</sup> David Fredosso, *The Washington Examiner*, —*Government Conference Spending Gone Wild!*, August 25, 2009, <http://washingtonexaminer.com/blogs/beltway-confidential/2009/08/government-conference-spending-gone-wild>.

implementing accountable conference policies for agencies. Agencies in the CJS Division of the “minibus,” primarily the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and NASA, must comply with the following new conference restrictions:

1. No grant funds may be used for defraying costs of conferences (Division B-section 517(c))
2. No funds can send more than 50 employees to a conference outside the United States (Division B- section 531)
3. Mandatory report on any costs and contracting procedures relating to each conference that costs more than \$20,000. (Division B- section 538)

In writing these provisions, the CJS appropriations conference report notes “The departments, agencies, boards, and commissions funded in this bill can and should significantly reduce operating expenses by placing greater scrutiny on overhead costs. Savings can and should be achieved by reducing non-essential travel...executive meetings, receptions, ceremonies, and conferences, and purchasing fewer promotional items such as t-shirts, hats, mugs, key chains, and other similar items.”<sup>3</sup>

This language is the perfect starting point and a model example for CJS, however, unfortunately the same standards are not applied to the other agencies in the separate divisions of the bill. This common sense amendment would place the exact same conference standards set in CJS to the Departments of Agriculture, Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development.

The Department of Agriculture is the poster child as to why this amendment should apply to the other agencies in the bill.

While federal agencies have come under scrutiny for their lavish spending on conferences, the Department of Agriculture is no exception. In May of 2008, the Federal Financial Management Subcommittee released a report on the Department of Agriculture conference spending.

Among many items, the subcommittee report found the following:

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<sup>3</sup> FY 2012 CJS Appropriations Senate Committee Report <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CRPT-112srpt78/pdf/CRPT-112srpt78.pdf>

- The Department sent employees to Las Vegas for “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” conferences, to resorts in Australia for conferences on mushrooms and crawdads, and to Disney resorts to discuss competitive intelligence; and
- In 2006, one entity within USDA, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) sent 47 people (44 of whom were employees) to 10 conferences in Hawaii at a cost of \$71,412. The conferences took place on the Islands of Maui, Oahu, Honolulu, and Molokai. One was a “Congressional” seminar to educate attendees on the U.S. Congress, though the event location — the Hilton Hawaiian Village Beach Resort and Spa— is 4,500 miles from Congress.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, according to data submitted to a Senate oversight subcommittee, in just 2006 alone:

- 213 USDA employees attended approximately 94 separate conferences in **Las Vegas** at a cost of \$254,755;
- 64 USDA employees (and 3 non-employees on USDA’s dime) traveled to **Hawaii** to attend approximately 28 separate conferences for a total cost of \$130,600;
- 713 USDA employees attended 235 **Sacramento** conferences, at a cost of \$560,000;
- 144 USDA employees attended 38 **San Francisco** conferences, at a cost of \$144,000;
- 270 USDA employees went to approximately 59 separate conferences in **Orlando**, Florida — home to Disney World — at a cost of \$282,656;
- 112 employees went to 34 conferences in **Anchorage**, Alaska at a cost of \$227,000;

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<sup>4</sup> 2008 FFM Subcommittee Report on Department of Agriculture Conference Spending  
[http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File\\_id=c6ae538f-1708-4c93-8024-4696bc38a9a2](http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File_id=c6ae538f-1708-4c93-8024-4696bc38a9a2)

- 247 employees went to approximately 89 conferences in **Phoenix**, Arizona at a cost of \$321,000;
- 141 employees went to approximately 46 conferences in **Tucson**, Arizona at a cost of \$132,700; and
- 20,959 employees went to 6,719 conferences and training activities across the nation and around the world, at an unknown cost to taxpayers in lost productivity.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, with this documented blatant abuse of taxpayer funds there is no reason to not place restrictions and shine more light on conference spending elsewhere in the federal government. Additionally, with the strides made in the availability of video and teleconferences, the overhead costs of conferences should be drastically reduced government-wide.

The conference provisions in CJS should be emulated in all appropriations bill for FY 2012 and beyond. This common sense amendment just builds upon the promising work of the CJS appropriations bill as it relates to conference accountability.

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<sup>5</sup> 2008 FFM Subcommittee Report on Department of Agriculture Conference Spending  
[http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File\\_id=c6ae538f-1708-4c93-8024-4696bc38a9a2](http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File_id=c6ae538f-1708-4c93-8024-4696bc38a9a2)