



United States Department of Agriculture

FOR THE FARMERS OR FOR FUN: USDA SPENDS OVER \$90 MILLION IN CONFERENCE COSTS



**The first in a multi-part review
of how federal agencies have spent billions
of dollars on conferences over the last six years.**

United States Senate
110th Congress
Office of Senator Tom Coburn, M.D., Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information,
Federal Services and International Security

May 2008
www.coburn.senate.gov/ffm

Dear Taxpayer:

As part of my commitment to question how Washington spends your money, this report is the first installment in a series of oversight reports on federal agencies' conference spending.¹ My hope is that this effort will assist federal agencies and those of us in Congress overseeing their budgets to rein in wasteful and non-essential spending and to reevaluate current spending before asking Congress and taxpayers to send more.

In the summer of 2005, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information and International Security launched a government-wide inquiry into travel spending.² The Subcommittee asked federal agencies to report conference sponsorship, participation and related spending since fiscal year (FY) 2001, in what was the first wide-scale congressional oversight on this topic.

As the Subcommittee sifted through the agency responses, it became apparent that there were limited financial or managerial controls in place to track or restrict the travel of government employees to conferences domestically and around the world. One outcome of our investigation was the near-unanimous complaint from all the agencies about how difficult it was to answer our questions. Most responses came back with substantive gaps and missing data. Because the agency responses raised as many questions as answers, we began a series of hearings in February 2006 to look further into federal conference spending.

Conference attendance for federal employees in many, if not most, cases is discretionary, though it is not my intent to question or criticize all conference spending as wasteful or extravagant simply because of a conference's title or location. Some conferences provide valuable educational or agency-related information in a format unavailable in a normal office setting. Many conferences, by the sponsors' design, are held in locations chosen to attract attendees.

That being said, 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 that has cost you, the taxpayers, over \$2 billion on conferences from 2000-2006. This spending has increased over 95 percent, from over \$200 million a year in FY2000 to almost \$400 million a year in FY2006.³ In addition to the financial cost of these trips, our oversight hearings highlighted the lost productivity of government employees when they are out of the office on non-essential travel.

The Department of Agriculture, the first in this conference oversight series, is just one among many federal agencies that I believe has overspent on non-essential conferences and travel.

I hope that this particular Department, and others we will examine in future reports, will welcome this oversight and work with us to help identify even more areas of waste and abuse and new ways to better prioritize our nation's limited financial resources.

As part of my ongoing effort to shine the light on the federal government, I encourage anyone with examples of government waste, fraud, or abuse to let us know about it.

To submit a tip (anonymously, if you wish) through the Internet, please visit my tip page:

<http://coburn.senate.gov/ffm/index.cfm?FuseAction=SubmitATip.Home>.

Or to submit a tip by mail to my subcommittee office, please mail to:

Senator Tom Coburn

Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information,
and International Security

340 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Washington, DC 20510

With your help we can begin making a difference and change the way Washington works.

Sincerely,

Senator Tom Coburn, M.D.

¹ The first report entitled "CDC Off Center: A review of how an agency tasked with fighting and preventing disease has spent hundreds of millions of tax dollars for failed prevention efforts, international junkets, and lavish facilities, but cannot demonstrate it is controlling disease," was released in June 2007,

http://coburn.senate.gov/ffm/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore_id=f016bd58-8e45-45d4-951a-b6b4d1ef3e70.

² The U.S. Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information and International Security will be referred to as the "FFM Subcommittee" or "the Subcommittee" throughout this report.

³ Based on conference expenditure figures from fiscal year 2000 through 2006, provided by individual agencies in response to the Subcommittee's oversight requests. The Departments of Veterans Affairs and Interior did not submit data for a combined nine years of conferences so these figures (other than those for FY06) are likely understated.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Federal agencies have come under scrutiny for their lavish spending on conferences and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) is no exception. The Department recently reported to Congress that it has almost tripled its conference expenditures since the year 2000, to \$19.4 million in FY2006.

There are approximately 112,000 employees at USDA, and in 2006, the Agency sent 20,959 employees to 6,719 conferences and training activities across the nation and around the world.¹ USDA saw a 191 percent increase in conference spending since 2000.

Some of these expenditures included sending 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.

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.

While USDA-attended martini and cigar receptions (see page 13) might add pizzazz to the social calendar, having taxpayers foot the bill for costly and unnecessary conference travel is one “sin tax” too many.

The following report examines just a snapshot of the thousands of conferences USDA recently attended.

¹ USDA’s February 5, 2007 response to Ranking Member Coburn regarding FY2006 Conference and Training Activity, pages 1 through 254.

I. BACKGROUND

USDA

AGENCY HISTORY

The Department of Agriculture was created in 1862 under the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. The Department's mission, as outlined on its website, is "to provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science, and efficient management."¹

Some of the conferences attended by the USDA likely would not fit honest Abe's criteria for efficient management of taxpayer resources.

FUNDING HISTORY

The FY2008 agriculture appropriations bill was signed into law on December 26, 2007, as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008 (Public Law 110-161). Excluding funding for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and its programs, the act provides \$89.2 billion in total funds for USDA-run programs, including \$17.7 billion in gross discretionary appropriations, and \$71.5 billion in mandatory funds.²

RECORD ON CONFERENCE SPENDING

USDA told a Senate oversight subcommittee that it had spent more than \$90 million on conferences from 2000-2006. Agency conference expenditures jumped more than \$4 million, or 60 percent from 2001-2002, the first full fiscal year of the Bush Administration.

USDA Conference Spending 2000-2006

Year	Amount reported in 2005	Revised amounts as reported in August 2006 & February 2007
2000	\$6,675,134	\$6,675,134
2001	\$8,167,978	\$6,005,287
2002	\$14,715,056	\$10,621,506
2003	\$15,201,711	\$13,537,628
2004	\$19,595,914	\$15,946,157
2005	\$10,194,054	\$18,348,119
2006		\$19,440,333
Total	\$74,549,847	\$90,574,164

LACK OF ACCOUNTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY ON CONFERENCE SPENDING

In a 2006 exchange with then-Chairman Tom Coburn (R-OK) and then-Ranking Member Tom Carper (D-DE) during a Senate hearing, USDA's Chief Financial Officer (CFO)

Charles Christopherson disputed the accuracy of the conference funding numbers his own agency submitted to the Senate the previous year.³

He informed the Senators that he did not believe the 2005 numbers were correct because USDA did not have a uniform reporting system to capture the costs of conferences and travel. The CFO could not explain why, in just one year, the spending figures had been adjusted, including an \$8 million increased adjustment for 2005 conference costs.

Despite spending over \$19 million a year on conferences, the USDA's CFO testified before the Senate in 2006 that his agency's system to track expenditures was 20 years behind private sector efforts:

“Like private companies in the 1980s, the Department is moving through the transformation [today, in 2006] to update technology to increase the productivity of our employees and provide better information to management.”

YEARLY DISASTER FARM ASSISTANCE NOT BUDGETED FOR WHILE CONFERENCES ARE

Adding billions of dollars to the deficit, practically every year, is Congress' emergency spending on federal farm assistance. Because Congress labels the spending “emergency,” it does not “count” in the federal budget (it is not required to compete for a limited amount of the federal budget pie, nor does it need to be offset with comparable reductions in other programs), but instead is added directly to the already large federal deficit.

If the federal government is going to be involved in agriculture, then, at the very least, farmers and those living in rural America should be given higher priority in the agency's spending than USDA employee trips to conferences, including those at resorts and casinos.

From fiscal year 1989 through fiscal year 2007, 34 appropriations, authorization, or farm disaster acts added approximately \$59.04 billion in supplemental/emergency funding for USDA programs, according to the Congressional Research Service.⁴ Approximately \$46.7 billion, or just under 80 percent of the total amount, was for FY1999-FY2007 alone.

Putting aside the debate over the value or constitutionality of federal farm spending and Congress' classifying frequently occurring and predictable weather events as “emergencies,” the reality is that the politicians in Washington have decided in 18 of the last 19 years that more funds should be spent by the Department of Agriculture than is allotted in the annual budget requested by Presidents of both parties. In light of this trend, USDA could, at the very least, stop diverting resources to non-essential employee travel, such as on a fungus conference “down under” in Australia, or on a Disney resort conference on competitive intelligence.

¹ About USDA, http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/s.7.0.A/7.0.1OB?navtype=MA&navid=ABOUT_USDA.

² “Agriculture and Related Agencies: FY2008 Appropriations, Updated February 1, 2008,” Congressional Research Service (CRS), see final chart on page 43, entitled “RECAPITULATION,” <http://www.congress.gov/erp/ra/pdf/RL34132.pdf>. Excluding funding for FDA (line VI) results in a total appropriation of \$89.2 billion (\$91 billion minus \$1.8 billion) and a gross discretionary figure of \$17.7 billion (\$19.5 billion minus \$1.8 billion). According to the CRS, “Because of accounting practices such as limiting

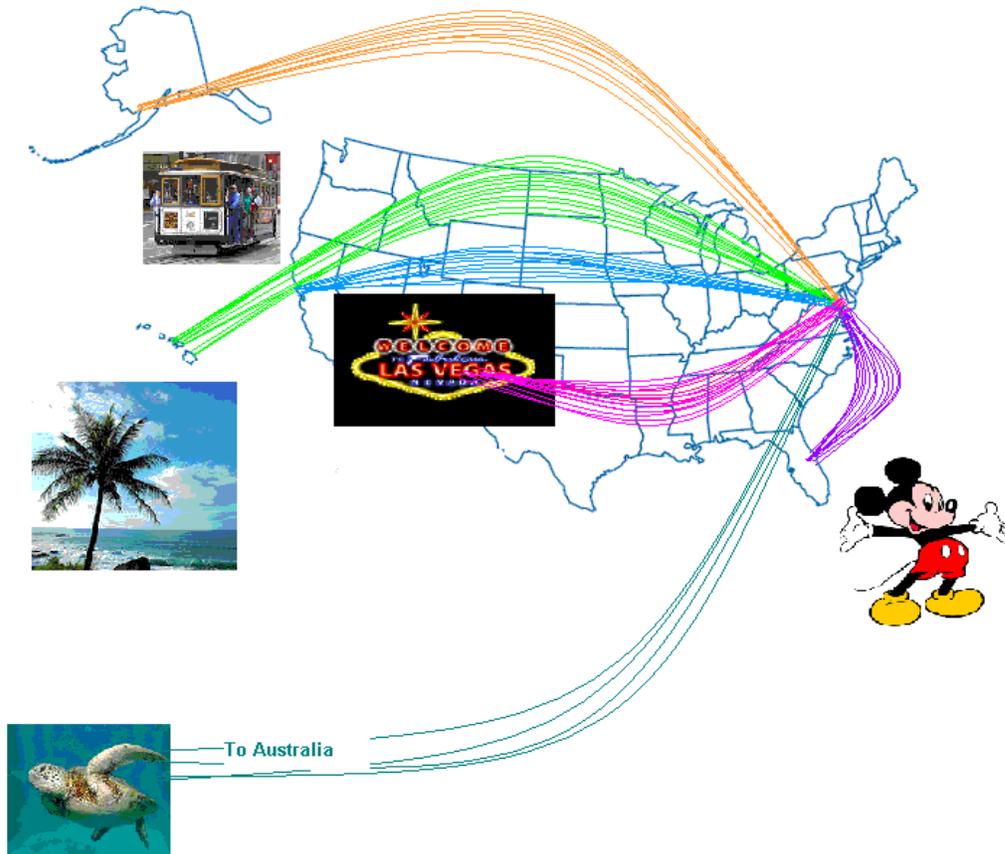
the ability of certain mandatory programs to spend their authorized amounts, the discretionary amounts that the appropriators actually provide to agencies is higher than the bill's official discretionary amount. Thus, the agriculture appropriations bill has two sets of numbers for discretionary spending: (1) an official "net" discretionary amount against which the 302(b) allocation is measured for purposes of meeting budgetary requirements and (2) a "gross" discretionary amount actually made available to agencies that is somewhat higher by virtue of "scorekeeping adjustments." This report uses the gross amount as the funds the agency may spend.

³ "Round Two: Federal Agencies and Conference Spending," Senate FFM Subcommittee hearing, September 14, 2006.

⁴ "Emergency Funding for Agriculture: A Brief History of Supplemental Appropriations, FY1989-FY2008," Congressional Research Service, January 9, 2008, <http://www.congress.gov/erp/rl/pdf/RL31095.pdf>.

Long-Distance Conferencing

Casino & Resort Conferences Host Many USDA Employees



USDA has approximately 112,000 employees and in 2006 the agency sent 20,959 employees to as many as 6,719 conferences and training activities across the nation and around the world.¹ The agency saw a 191 percent increase in conference spending since the year 2000.

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;

- 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.²

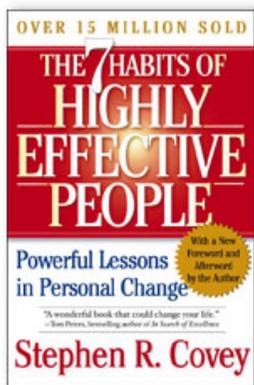
¹ USDA's February 5, 2007 response to Ranking Member Coburn regarding "FY2006 Conference and Training Activity," pages 1 through 254. USDA's submission to the oversight committee listed 6,719 "conferences" and "training activit[ies]" attended, with the events segregated by each attending USDA subagency. Nothing in the list distinguishes a conference from a training activity, so for purposes of these figures, all events are counted as conferences. Because multiple subagencies attended the same conference or used different names for the same conference, an exact conference total is unavailable.

² Ibid., USDA response.

II. FINDINGS

USDA CONFERENCES: ESSENTIAL OR NON-ESSENTIAL TRAVEL?

LEARNING TO BE EFFECTIVE BY SPENDING THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS IN VEGAS



Few taxpayers would want federal bureaucrats to be anything less than “highly effective.” But whether they would approve spending over \$11,000 in one year to send eight USDA employees to Las Vegas, Nevada to attend seminars on “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” is another question.

In response to congressional inquiry, USDA reported that eight employees with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) attended what appear to be three separate “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” events in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2006.¹

If the same eight employees instead had purchased the audio program on Amazon.com for \$31.29 and skipped the seminar, taxpayers would have effectively saved \$11,039.86.²

LEARNING ABOUT CONGRESS, AS FAR AWAY FROM CONGRESS AS POSSIBLE

Even federal employees sometimes need a refresher on how Congress works, but spending \$13,475 to send six USDA employees to a “Congressional Seminar” conference at the Hilton Hawaiian Village Beach Resort and Spa in Honolulu might lead to fair charges that Congress is not the only federal body wasting taxpayers’ dollars.

On May 9-12, 2006 the Federal Asian Pacific American Council (FAPAC) hosted its 21st Annual Congressional Seminar/National Leadership Training Conference in Honolulu. In follow-up responses to Congressional inquiry, USDA defended its participation at the resort event, stating, “the conference represents a major component of USDA’s Civil Rights Program as it pertains to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.”³



Hilton Hawaiian Village Resort

The Hilton Hawaiian Honolulu is over 4,500 miles from Congress.

HEADING “DOWN UNDER” TO CONFERENCE ON FUNGUS



Two or three USDA employees travelled half way around the world to attend an Australian conference on fungus. The 8th International Mycological Conference was hosted by the Australasian Mycological Society. Mycology is the study of fungi of all kinds including mushrooms, molds, truffles, yeasts, lichens, and plant pathogens.⁴

USDA's Forest Service sent one employee to Cairns, Australia for the conference, which ran from August 20-26, 2006 and sent one employee (likely the same person) to a pre-conference workshop in Brisbane and Cairns. USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection

Service (APHIS) also sent one employee to the conference. All told, taxpayers spent \$12,953 for federal employees to discuss fungus in Australia.⁵

It is not that mushrooms and fungi are not important to agriculture, but is a conference on the subject important enough for USDA employees to fly to Australia?

According to conference organizers, the event was the first held in the Southern Hemisphere, an area of the world “whose scientists have made great contributions to many fields of Mycology.” And the location itself, Cairns, “enjoys close ties with the Asia Pacific region. With its combined World Heritage listed attractions of the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropic Rainforests, Cairns offers a uniquely tropical experience to visiting mycologists from around the world. As a very attractive Australian and international tourist city, Cairns offers holiday style accommodation located centrally to shops, restaurants, theatres, galleries and tropical beaches. The congress will be held at the very modern and spacious Cairns Convention Centre.”⁶



Cairns Convention Centre

Event organizers, of course, pitched the location to potential conference goers, reporting in their newsletter a year before the event, “Cairns – City flair meets friendly, tropical Australian style, the rainforest meets the reef and, above all,

everything about this superb destination meets and exceeds your expectations. Welcome to Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef region. It's a destination of choice to clear the mind, cleanse the body and invigorate the soul. Away from the hustle and bustle of metropolitan centres, the northern tropics are relaxing, restoring, rejuvenating. To reawaken a zest for learning, to restore a challenge and so much more – this is the place to be.”⁷



Westin St. John Resort & Villas

WHAT BETTER WAY TO BE GREEN (AND TAN) THAN TO ATTEND A TAXPAYER-FUNDED POLLUTION CONFERENCE AT A VIRGIN ISLANDS RESORT

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) sent one employee to a pollution conference in the U.S. Virgin Islands about nonsource pollution and for a "RC&D meeting."⁸ The conference called the "Ninth

Virgin Islands Nonpoint Source Pollution Conference: Preventing Pollution in the Caribbean: Reshaping Our Communities for the Future" was held November 28-20, 2005 at The Westin St. John Resort & Villas, St. John, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and USDA's NRCS was also listed as a sponsor.

According to the conference website, "The primary Conference objective is to increase awareness, knowledge levels and skills, resulting in behavior and practice changes by government, industry and residents in order to improve water quality throughout the Virgin Islands."⁹

Nonpoint source pollution, the topic of the conference, is the indirect or scattered sources of pollution that enter a water system such as drainage or runoff from agricultural fields, airborne pollution from crop dusting, and runoff from urban areas (construction sites, etc.).¹⁰

The resort hosting the Nonpoint Source Pollution Conference advertises itself as a "Shimmering Jewel of the Caribbean. Surrounded by lush green hills of the emerald isle, lies The Westin Resort, St. John. Just minutes from the pristine Virgin Islands National Park, the resort is grand in terms of seclusion and abundant activity."¹¹

In addition to its world class beaches, the Westin Resort also has over 10,000 square feet of indoor meeting and function space, in addition to its beach-side, tented Palm Terrace which "is ideal for receptions and dinners."¹²



Disney's Coronado Springs Resort

USDA EMPLOYEE HEADS TO DISNEY RESORT AND A "HOT, HOT, HOT" FIESTA RECEPTION

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) sent one employee to the Society of Competitive Intelligence Conference (SCIP) in 2006. While the Agency listed the conference location as Lake Buena Vista, Florida, a quick Google search reveals that while the April 26-29, 2006 conference was in fact in that town, it was not at an ordinary conference center but at the Disney's Coronado Springs Resort.

Disney's Coronado Springs Resort invites its guests to "Embrace the legendary cultures of Mexico and the American Southwest amidst Mayan architectural flourishes at this lakeside Resort hotel."¹³

The conference sponsor, SCIP, "is a global nonprofit membership organization for everyone involved in creating and managing business knowledge. Our mission is to enhance the success of our members through leadership, education, advocacy, and networking."¹⁴

SCIP "provides education and networking opportunities for business professionals working in the rapidly growing field of competitive intelligence (the legal and ethical collection and analysis of information regarding the capabilities, vulnerabilities, and intentions of business competitors)."¹⁵

It is not known why the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service found it a priority to attend this conference, or what role, if any, the federal employee who attended played.

It is known that the conference was not all about managing business knowledge but included a martini bar and cigar reception as well as a golf event.

The conference included a "South Beach Fiesta Evening Reception" that was advertised as a reception:

that is sure to put some fiesta in your conference experience. This party combines the sizzle of Latin culture with the sleek sophistication of Florida's trendy South Beach. Our South Beach party is a combination of stylish ambiance, insatiable delights and rhythmic dance music. You and your guests will enjoy this high-energy party, surrounded by a vivid kaleidoscope of dazzling lights, tropical greens and hip dance club décor. Spice up the night with Latin dance instructors, or move and groove to the driving rhythms of a hypnotic salsa band. From the moment the martini bar opens until the last cigar is rolled, you and your guests will certainly remember this "hot, hot, hot" celebration.¹⁶

On Saturday, following two days of sessions and "active dialogs," attendees were invited to a four-hour golf event at Disney's Palm Golf Course. It is not known whether or not the USDA attendee participated in this activity.¹⁷

AUSTRALIAN SURFERS PARADISE RESORT HOSTS CRAWDAD CONFERENCE AND USDA EMPLOYEE



USDA's Forest Service sent one employee to Surfers Paradise in Australia for the 16th Symposium of the International Association of Astacology (IAA) from July 30 through August 5, 2006.¹⁸ Astacology is the study of crayfish and the IAA, the event's host, is "dedicated to the study, conservation, and wise utilization of freshwater crayfish."¹⁹

The venue was the Courtyard Marriott Surfers Paradise Resort, which is located in central Surfers Paradise on the Gold Coast of Queensland, Australia.²⁰ According to the Marriott Resort’s website:



Courtyard Marriott Surfers Paradise Resort, Australia

“Our Gold Coast hotel in Surfers Paradise is where visitors come to enjoy sunny beaches, water sports, shopping, dining, Gold Coast theme parks and energetic nightlife. Situated in the heart of this playground is the Courtyard Surfers Paradise Resort, offering superior Gold Coast hotel accommodation. Located next to the Centro shopping complex, just a stroll from Cavill Mall and the beach, ...[with] [s]pacious guest rooms captur[ing] dramatic views of the Pacific, the Nerang River or skyline from private balconies ...”²¹

The USDA’s Forest Service website reports that a researcher from the Fisheries Research Scientist Unit at the Center for Bottomland Hardwoods Research in Stoneville, Mississippi attended and presented at the Surfers Paradise conference. The presentation was titled “Effects of Small Reservoirs on Downstream Crayfish Communities” and the PowerPoint presentation posted online indicates the presentation dealt with findings surrounding Mississippi crayfish.²²



While the international community may have an interest in downstream Mississippi crayfish, taxpayers may also have an interest in questioning whether the topic of crayfish justified sending an employee down under to an Australian resort.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A FOREST SERVICE EMPLOYEE ATTENDS A PHOTOSHOP CONFERENCE AT A VEGAS CASINO RESORT ... STAYS IN VEGAS

The Photoshop World Conference & Expo was held September 7-9, 2006 in Las Vegas at the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino and one Forest Service employee was on hand for the event.²³

The Photoshop World Conference & Expo is produced by the National Association of Photoshop Professionals, “a dynamic trade association and the world’s leading resource for Adobe® Photoshop® training, news, and education. It is led by a world-class team of Photoshop experts, authors, consultants, trainers, and educators whose focus is to ensure that NAPP members are on the cutting edge of Adobe Photoshop techniques and technology.”²⁴



The Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas

The Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas “offers unmatched luxury, fine dining, renowned entertainment, personal service, and gaming excitement dreams are made of.”²⁵

Its 135,000 square-foot “gaming environment was designed to make waves along the Strip. You’ll play in a tropical setting of flowing water, lush foliage, and exotic architecture. And whether you prefer slots or tables, blackjack or poker, you’ll find a full selection of your favorite games.”²⁶

It is not clear how a Photoshop conference fits in with the Forest Service’s mission to apply “sound conservation and utilization practices to natural resources of the national forests and national grasslands ...”²⁷ Nor is it clear what, if any, role the USDA employee had at the conference. An internet search reveals a number of Photoshop training classes held in Washington, D.C., with an average price of \$795 —\$466 less than the Vegas conference on Photoshop.

¹ In response to congressional inquiry, USDA reported that eight employees with APHIS attended what may have been three separate “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” events in Las Vegas, NV, 6 at a cost of \$8,555.48, 1 at a cost of \$1,582.24, and 1 at a cost of \$1,152.46, for a total of \$11, 290.18.

² *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* retails for \$9.57 on Amazon.com and the audio program sells for \$31.29; http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw/002-9397337-3490458?initialSearch=1&url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=7+habits+of+highly+effective+people&Go.x=0&Go.y=0&Go=Go.

³ USDA response to Chairman Coburn’s follow-up questions, December 4, 2006.

⁴ The Mycological Society of America, <http://www.msafungi.org/>.

⁵ USDA’s February 5, 2007 response to Ranking Member Coburn.

⁶ “8th International Mycological Conference, 21-26 August, 2006, Cairns Convention Centre, Australia,” http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/msj7/info/2005/050205_invitation_IMC8.pdf.

⁷ “IMC8 – Cairns 2006,” South Australian Postgraduate Medical Education Association (SAPMEA) Second Newsletter, August 2005, <http://www.sapmea.asn.au/conventions/imc8/index.html>.

⁸ USDA’s February 5, 2007 response to Ranking Member Coburn, page 206 of 254. The location is listed in the USDA’s documents as St. Thomas, though all information about the conference online indicates it was actually in St. John’s.

⁹ Nonpoint Source Pollution Conference Website, <http://www.usvircd.org/NPS/VINPSconf2005.index.html>.

¹⁰ <http://www.nwrc.usgs.gov/fringe/glossary.html>.

¹¹ <http://www.westinresortstjohn.com/resort.htm>.

¹² <http://www.westinresortstjohn.com/conferences.htm>.

¹³ <http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/resorts/resortLanding?id=CoronadoSpringsResortLandingPage>.

¹⁴ Conference webpage, http://www.scip.org/2_overview.php.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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- ¹⁶ Conference webpage, South Beach Fiesta webpage, http://www.scip.org/06annual/e_fiesta.php.
- ¹⁷ Conference webpage, Schedule of Events, <http://www.scip.org/06annual/sch.php>.
- ¹⁸ USDA's February 5, 2007 response to Ranking Member Coburn regarding FY2006 Conference and Training Activity.
- ¹⁹ "About the IAA," The International Association of Astacology's webpage, <http://147.72.68.29/crayfish/IAA/index.htm>, accessed February 2008, photo from the 16th Biennial Symposium of the International Association of Astacology, http://iz.carnegiemn.org/crayfish/phpbb2/album_cat.php?cat_id=3&sid=6e24282f640a37f70e60eb17f13d1e93, accessed September 2007.
- ²⁰ Griffith University website, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/conference/iaa2006/content01.html>, accessed February 2008.
- ²¹ Marriott Surfers Paradise Resort website, <http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/oolcy-courtyard-surfers-paradise-resort/>, accessed February 2008. Photo also from Marriott website.
- ²² Presentation by Dr. Susan Adams to the 16th Symposium of International Association of Astacology, http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/cbhr/presentations/2006/sba_Effects_of_small_reservoirs_on_downstream_crayfish_communities/sba_Effects_of_small_reservoirs_on_downstream_crayfish_communities_Slide1.php#bottom; <http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/staff/768>.
- ²³ "Adobe Sneak Peek at Photoshop World," Lightroom-News.com press release dated August 29, 2006, <http://lightroom-news.com/2006/08/29/adobe-sneak-peek-at-photoshop-world/>.
- ²⁴ Photoshop World 08 website, <http://www.photoshopworld.com/2008/sponsorships.html>.
- ²⁵ Mandalay Bay description on google.com link.
- ²⁶ Mandalay Bay, Casino webpage, <http://www.mandalaybay.com/casino/>.
- ²⁷ "Forest Service (FS) Overview," USDA website, http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/s.7.0.A/7.0.10B?contentidonly=true&contentid=FS_Agency_Splash.xml&x=25&y=6.

III. CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT AND LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY

CONFERENCE TRANSPARENCY AMENDMENT

On December 14, 2007, conference transparency language drafted by Senator Coburn was folded into a larger farm bill amendment that was adopted by unanimous consent by the Senate. The transparency language remained in the farm bill as it passed the Senate the same day.¹ The House-passed farm bill carried no similar provision.

The House-Senate conference committee on the farm bill contains a modified version of the Senate-passed conference transparency language that maintains the intent of the original amendment.²

The conference transparency provision, if signed into law, would require yearly public and electronically searchable reports from the Secretary of Agriculture that would describe the costs and contracting procedures relating to each conference sponsored or held by USDA that cost taxpayers more than \$10,000. The report information would include the name, location, and number of employees attending the conference, as well as the costs (including travel expenses) and a description of the contracting procedures, if a procurement contract was awarded by USDA.

The House-Senate conferees, without explanation, eliminated two provisions from the Senate-passed bill that would have contributed to greater conference transparency. The final text headed to the President's desk does not require USDA to list the conference dates nor their primary sponsors.

The farm bill, with the conference transparency language included, passed the House with a veto-proof margin of 318-106 on May 14, 2008.³ The bill passed the Senate the following day with another veto-proof majority, 81-15.⁴ As of the release of this report, the bill was on its way to the President's desk. The Bush Administration continued to indicate it would veto the bill, though based on the votes in both chambers, it appears Congress will override any veto.

¹ Section 11081 of Senate Amendment 3855, sponsored by Senator Tom Harkin to "The Farm, Nutrition, and Bioenergy Act of 2007," (H.R. 2419) proposed and adopted by unanimous consent on December 14, 2007. SEC. 11081. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE CONFERENCE TRANSPARENCY.

(a) Reports on Conference Expenditures- For fiscal year 2008 and each fiscal year thereafter, the Secretary shall submit to the Inspector General of the Department of Agriculture quarterly reports that describe the costs and contracting procedures relating to each conference or meeting held by the Department of Agriculture during the quarter covered by the report for which the cost to the Federal Government was more than \$10,000.

(b) Requirements- Each report submitted under subsection (a) shall include, for each conference and meeting covered by the report--

(1) a description of the number [of] participants attending, and the purpose of those participants for attending, the conference or meeting;

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- (2) a detailed statement of the costs incurred by the Federal Government relating to that conference or meeting, including--
 - (A) the cost of any food or beverages;
 - (B) the cost of any audio-visual services;
 - (C) the cost of all related travel; and
 - (D) a discussion of the methodology used to determine which costs relate to that conference or meeting; and
 - (3) a description of the contracting procedures relating to that conference or meeting, including--
 - (A) whether contracts were awarded on a competitive basis; and
 - (B) a discussion of any cost comparison conducted by the Department of Agriculture in evaluating potential contractors for any conference or meeting.

(c) Travel Expenses-

(1) DEFINITION OF CONFERENCE- In this subsection, the term 'conference' means a meeting that--

- (A) is held for consultation, education, awareness, or discussion;
- (B) includes participants who are not all employees of the same agency;
- (C) is not held entirely at an agency facility;
- (D) involves costs associated with travel and lodging for some participants; and
- (E) is sponsored by 1 or more agencies, 1 or more organizations that are not agencies, or a combination of those agencies or organizations.

(2) REPORT- Not later than September 30 of each fiscal year, the Secretary shall submit to the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the Senate, and post on the public website of the Department of Agriculture in a searchable, electronic format, a report on each conference for which the Department of Agriculture paid travel expenses during the fiscal year covered by the report, including--

- (A) a description of--
 - (i) the itemized expenses paid by the Department of Agriculture, including travel expenses and any other expenditures to support the conference;
 - (ii) the primary sponsor of the conference; and
 - (iii) the location of the conference; and
- (B) in the case of a conference for which the Department of Agriculture was the primary sponsor, a statement that--
 - (i) justifies the location selected;
 - (ii) demonstrates the cost efficiency of the location;
 - (iii) specifies the date or dates of the conference;
 - (iv) includes a brief explanation of the ways in which the conference advanced the mission of the Department of Agriculture; and
 - (v) specifies the total number of individuals whose travel or attendance at the conference was paid for, in whole or in part, by the Department of Agriculture.

² Section 14208 of the House-Senate conference report "Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008," (H.R. 2419).

SEC. 14208. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE CONFERENCE TRANSPARENCY.

(a) Report.--

- (1) REQUIREMENT.--Not later than September 30 of each year, the Secretary of Agriculture shall submit to the Committee on Agriculture of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the Senate, a report on conferences sponsored or held by the Department of Agriculture or attended by employees of the Department of Agriculture.
- (2) CONTENTS.--Each report under paragraph (1) shall contain--
 - (A) for each conference sponsored or held by the Department or attended by employees of the Department--
 - (i) the name of the conference;
 - (ii) the location of the conference;
 - (iii) the number of Department of Agriculture employees attending the conference; and
 - (iv) the costs (including travel expenses) relating to such conference; and

(B) for each conference sponsored or held by the Department of Agriculture for which the Department awarded a procurement contract, a description of the contracting procedures related to such conference.

(3) EXCLUSIONS.--The requirement in paragraph (1) shall not apply to any conference--

(A) for which the cost to the Federal Government was less than \$10,000; or

(B) outside of the United States that is attended by the Secretary or the Secretary's designee as an official representative of the United States government.

(b) *Availability of Report.*--Each report submitted in accordance with subsection (a) shall be posted in a searchable format on a Department of Agriculture website that is available to the public.

(c) *Definition of Conference.*--In this section, the term "conference"--

(1) means a meeting that--

(A) is held for consultation, education, awareness, or discussion;

(B) includes participants from at least one agency of the Department of Agriculture;

(C) is held in whole or in part at a facility outside of an agency of the Department of Agriculture; and

(D) involves costs associated with travel and lodging for some participants; and

(2) does not include any training program that is continuing education or a curriculum-based educational program, provided that such training program is held independent of a conference of a non-governmental organization.

³ House Roll Call Number 315, <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2008/roll315.xml>.

⁴ Senate Roll Call Number 130,

http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=2&vote=00130.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Every conference should be readily defensible, on its face, to regular Americans in terms of topic, location and participants. It is time for USDA to scale back on conference costs, make some tough decisions, and set priorities.

SUGGESTED CONFERENCE JUSTIFICATION TEST:

USDA and other agencies should be sure that every conference attended by federal employees passes the following tests:

- Does the conference help further the Department's mission?
- Could the information provided at the conference be disseminated instead through a teleconference, the Internet or scholarly publication subsequent to the conference?
- Is the location appropriate and justified?
- Is the number of employees attending justified, and could one employee attend instead of many, and provide detailed briefings to other employees afterward?
- Is this a wise use of tax dollars when we have an over \$9 trillion national debt?
- Could the amount spent on the conference have been better spent on a higher priority, or not spent at all?

PUT TRAVEL INFORMATION ONLINE NOW:

With or without the passage into law of a federal conference transparency law, USDA and every federal agency should immediately make available online all conference and travel expenses with as much detail as possible, including dates and the events' primary sponsors. If agencies have nothing to hide and are confident that their conference travel expenditures will pass public scrutiny, taxpayers should not have to wait for Congress to pass a law mandating disclosure.

V. CONCLUSION

With a mission to “**to provide leadership on** food, agriculture, natural resources and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science, and **efficient management**” (emphasis added), USDA has its work cut out for it.¹

It is worth reiterating that neither this report, nor subsequent reports on other agencies’ spending, is an effort to discredit the work that USDA does nor the work of its employees. The report will hopefully be seen for what it is: an effort to shine some light on questionable travel spending that may distract the agency from fulfilling its central mission.

There are many who would say already that the Department is bigger and more bureaucratic than its mission requires. This snapshot of conference expenditures demonstrates, in the very least, that a reprioritization of USDA conference spending is in order, that Congress needs to do more oversight of extraneous department expenditures, and that the agency itself needs to have more internal controls.

If the USDA conference transparency language included in the final farm bill is signed into law, politicians and taxpayers alike will be able to help scrutinize USDA conference spending and help us to hold the agency accountable for its travel expenses. If the agency follows the recommendation listed above and posts the information online now, the public will not have to wait for the transparency and accountability process to begin.

At the end of the day, government agencies must overcome their “spring break” mentality when it comes to conference travel and work toward utilizing taxpayer dollars more efficiently. With the advancement of Internet communication and video and teleconferencing, we can share the same information at a fraction of the cost.

It is fair to question the appropriateness of almost 21,000 USDA employees going to conferences around the nation and the world in just one year (2006).² It is more than fair to ask whether or not USDA employees should be spending so much time and money at beach-side resorts and on the Las Vegas strip to attend some of these conferences.

It is also fair to assume that President Lincoln, under whose Administration the USDA was founded, would expect nothing less.

¹ About USDA, http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/.s.7.0.A/7.0.1OB?navtype=MA&navid=ABOUT_USDA.

² USDA’s February 5, 2007 response to Ranking Member Coburn regarding FY2006 Conference and Training Activity, pages 1 through 254.