

16 January 2014

The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Chair
Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC

Re: January 14th Committee Hearing on “Examining Conference and Travel Spending Across the Federal Government”

Dear Chairman Carper:

I am writing to share the views of IEEE-USA on the issue of government participation in science and technology-related conferences as background for your January 14th hearing on “Examining Conference and Travel Spending Across the Federal Government,” and ask that this letter be placed in the hearing record.

The response by Congress and the Executive Branch seeking to ensure appropriate use of government funds for conference and travel expenses in light of the GSA Conferences scandal has been broad and prescriptive. When combined with significant pressures to reduce government spending due to the budget sequester, they have resulted in a variety of unintended and unfortunate consequences that are detrimental to the interests of the United States. One of these consequences has been a significant reduction in the participation of government scientists and engineers (S&Es) in professional conferences that have historically served as an effective and efficient means for advancing critical Federal S&T research and related missions.

With over 200,000 engineers, scientists and allied professionals employed in all sectors of the economy as members, IEEE-USA strongly supports active participation by government scientists and engineers in professional conferences. Participation allows federal scientists and engineers to exchange ideas on novel research, remain current in their technical disciplines, and form valuable collaborations. Professional conferences tie together the U.S. science and engineering community, promote the dissemination of research and technical innovation, facilitate peer review of research, provide training opportunities, create venues for recruitment of talent, and help educate graduate students.

Participation in overseas conferences additionally provides valuable insights into the more than two-thirds of the world’s research that is not performed in the U.S., including access to foreign researchers whose ability to enter the U.S. may be inhibited by immigration regulations or visa processing constraints. The absence of U.S. participation internationally has already had significant negative repercussions,

including fewer keynote invitations to leaders in U.S. science and engineering. These conferences permit the U.S. scientists and engineers to attain and retain leadership in a globally competitive R&D environment.

Many federal agencies use technical conferences as opportunities to engage with a wide collection of researchers for peer review, program reviews and future program planning. By drawing technical groups together to a single location, federal agencies can more efficiently review a large collection of independent research projects, helping stay abreast of their R&D investment portfolio while realizing significant cost savings over performing multiple site visits to each researcher's laboratory.

Scientific and technical conferences also play a catalytic role in encouraging technology transfer from our national laboratories and research facilities to the private sector. Effective collaborations, partnerships and information-sharing require the type of face-to-face communications that conference settings provide.

Support for the active participation of government scientists and engineers in the broader professional community is also essential if the federal government wishes to competitively recruit and retain top scientific and technical talent in federal positions. Without the opportunity to present and publish their research, engage in peer review and collaboration, and obtain continuing education, highly qualified technical professionals will pursue career opportunities outside the public sector. The importance of professional development through participation in professional conferences was recognized in the Office of Science and Technology Policy memo, Scientific Integrity, dated 17 December 2010, and in numerous department and agency policies implementing that memo.

The Office of Management and Budget took a useful step last year by issuing a Controller's Alert to federal departments and agencies noting that "as each agency reviews its travel and conference-related activities, it is critical for each agency to continue to recognize the important role that mission-related travel and conferences can often play in Government operations. Given the unique travel and conference needs of each agency, there are circumstances in which physical collocation is necessary to complete the mission. These circumstances may include, but are not limited to, collaborations in the scientific community..."

IEEE-USA believes much more can be done to facilitate participation of government scientists and engineers in S&T conferences through a streamlining of the various bureaucratic rules and processes that were put in place post-GSA to manage and oversee conference expenditures. Modest steps such as allowing approval of multiyear waivers for federal participation in established technical conferences or exempting standards-setting and federal advisory committee meetings from conference travel restrictions would help significantly. The most important thing, however, is for Congress and the Administration to recognize and communicate the value of this participation, in order to create a climate that reinforces a strong and continuing engagement between federal S&T mission agencies and the broader S&T community.

In closing, we would note that Federal policies driving disengagement of government scientists and engineers from the S&T community is encouraging organizations like IEEE to proactively consider relocating major technical conferences out of the U.S. We have been frustrated, and our nation is being embarrassed by the number of invited talks by prominent U.S. government researchers that have been cancelled. Some hosts in the EU are discouraged from even inviting US speakers because travel approval processes result in cancelations that come too late to make program changes. In an age of multi-national big-science collaborations like ITER and CERN, our nation's ability to collaborate on science and technology is waning. As a consequence of these and similar self-inflicted wounds, our global competitiveness is being challenged by China and the EU.

For a more detailed description of the issue and its policy implications, please refer to IEEE-USA's position statement on "Participation in Professional Conferences by Government Scientists and Engineers", which is available on-line at:
<http://www.ieeeusa.org/policy/positions/profconferences1012.pdf>

We would also refer you to the testimony offered by the Honorable Rush Holt (NJ-12) at a similar hearing held by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on 27 Feb. 2013. As a trained physicist in public service, Congressman Holt offers experience-based insights that underscore the value of government participation in S&T conferences. His testimony is available on-line at: <http://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Holt-Testimony-Final.pdf>

Thank you for your consideration and please call upon us if we can be of any assistance to the Committee on this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary L. Blank".

Gary L. Blank, Ph.D.
2014 President, IEEE-USA

Cc: Members, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs