January 29, 2014

The American Physiological Society (APS) appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee on current and proposed restrictions on travel for employees of the federal government. The APS represents more than 11,000 member physiologists who conduct research and teach at institutions across the country, including in academia, industry and government agencies. Each year the APS sponsors several scientific conferences where scientists can exchange ideas, share the results of their research and forge critical connections with their colleagues. Restricting the ability of federal scientists to participate in these interactions has a negative impact on the scientists themselves, as well as on the scientific community as a whole. To learn more about these impacts, we asked our members who work for the federal government to share their concerns with us in an anonymous forum. Their input is included in our comments.

Scientific meetings provide a unique environment where researchers gather to share the results of their work with others. Learning about what other researchers are doing in the field helps spur new ideas and foster collaborations. This exchange of ideas is crucial for problem-solving and future innovation. Scientists critically review the work that is presented, including preliminary data. Their feedback in turn enhances the research. These interactions are particularly important for early career scientists. These individuals, who are just establishing a research program, often have the most to gain from their interactions with more senior members of their discipline.

Moreover, the current travel restrictions effectively set some government scientists up for failure. For example scientists at the NIH must achieve an international scientific reputation in order to be granted tenure. Because they are not allowed to make timely commitments to present their research at scholarly meetings—even when there would be no cost to the government—the organizers have to look elsewhere. If researchers with world-class potential are penalized for government service, they too will look elsewhere.

Scientific conferences also serve as a place to meet other scientists trying to solve similar problems. Senior scientists looking to hire personnel for their labs recruit at these meetings, and junior scientists attend to seek future employment. By restricting travel, federal researchers are unable to take advantage of opportunities to share the
results of their work, collaborate with their peers, improve their research programs, and recruit promising junior scientists.

Restrictions placed on travel for federal scientists also limit their participation in the activities of their scientific societies that sometimes include continuing medical education. Because clinicians who work for government agencies are required to maintain their credentials, they face particular challenges when travel restrictions prevent them from participating in continuing education activities.

Travel restrictions have also imposed significant administrative burden due to the lengthy and onerous approval process. Some members report they have to request approval so far in advance that the meeting programs are not yet published, making it difficult to judge whether the meeting would be useful to attend. Moreover, due to the long processing time, final travel approval may come just before the scientific meeting. This is problematic and costly because booking hotel rooms and purchasing airline travel at a late date is more difficult than doing so well in advance, and it is costly for the government since late meeting registration fees are higher. We were told that some agencies have implemented additional administrative requirements, further diverting taxpayer resources that might otherwise be used to fund research directly. Our impression is that the amount of administrative scrutiny being given to travel would surprise the Committee.

In addition to the negative impacts on individual government researchers and the cost to the government, restricting the ability of federal scientists to participate in the scientific community is detrimental to the progress of science. Cross-cutting collaborations and interdisciplinary interactions are increasingly being recognized as the shortest and best path to the successful translation of scientific findings into practice. Reducing the participation of government scientists in the research community dilutes federal input, influence, and impact on course of scientific thought, and it runs counter to the goal of maximizing access to the results of government funded research. There are also many government scientists who make funding decisions about grants for the extramural scientific community. By restricting their access to scientific conferences, they cannot maintain an up-to-date knowledge of their fields. These scientists also serve as an invaluable source of information for extramural scientists, who look to them for information about funding priorities and the grant review process.

The scientific community relies heavily on federal support for the conduct of basic research, both through extramural grant funding and intramural programs whose employees work directly for the federal government. Resources must be used wisely and in an accountable, transparent manner. The current restrictions on travel for federal scientists have limited their ability to effectively and efficiently carry out their missions. Efforts should be made to revise the regulations to ensure that scientists can be active participants in the scientific community without wasting taxpayer dollars on administrative burden.

Thank you for considering our input.

Sincerely,

Kim E. Barrett, Ph.D.
President