



9650 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20814-3998
Phone: (301) 634-7300 • Fax: (301) 634-7079
society@genetics-gsa.org
www.genetics-gsa.org

**Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
on conference and travel spending across the federal government**

**Submitted by the Genetics Society of America
January 29, 2014**

We are pleased to submit this testimony on behalf of the Genetics Society of America (GSA), a professional scientific society with more than 5,000 members worldwide working to deepen our understanding of the living world by advancing the field of genetics.

Among other activities, the Society sponsors several international scientific conferences each year that bring scientists together to share cutting-edge research even before results are published in scientific journals. Indeed, conferences are a primary means for the scientific community to interact and are essential to the scientific enterprise. In addition to providing a venue for sharing and getting feedback on ongoing research, scientific meetings are a primary way to catalyze new connections and collaborations, especially opportunities to bring together experts from different areas of research. Many important insights have resulted from conversations at scientific meetings, which help enhance the efficiency of the research enterprise. As such, the only way to keep up-to-date on the latest scientific advances is by active participation in conferences. Meetings are also the most efficient way to learn about a new discipline, so they are especially critical for trainees who represent the future of our field. Indeed, many of our members pay out of pocket to attend conferences, indicating just how important these meetings are to their careers and to the advancement of science.

The Genetics Society of America is concerned about the unintended impacts of recent government restrictions on federal employee travel and conference sponsorship. While we share the concerns about extravagant spending that prompted these regulations and agree that federal agencies should be responsible stewards of public resources, we worry that agency actions are having a significant and negative effect on many appropriate and essential activities. The detrimental impact is especially pronounced on federal government employees—including both intramural researchers employed by federal agencies like the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and program directors who oversee the federal investment in scientific research—but the entire community suffers.

In this testimony, we highlight some of the ways these regulations are being experienced in the community. We believe that the new restrictions are leading to a reduction in efficiency and a reduced return on the nation's investment in research.

Government employees often experience significant delays in receiving approval to travel to scientific conferences, including those we host. These federal workers generally are required to initiate their travel requests six to nine months in advance, which is often well before the scientific program for the meeting is set. That means government scientists must request approval to attend a meeting before knowing what will be discussed, or even if their own presentation will be accepted.

As one example, NIH scientists must have their travel approved by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), meaning the decisions are made by offices far removed from the science that would be presented at the meeting. The Department imposes a cap on attendance to a given meeting across HHS, and these strict limits on attendance apply to even large and broad meetings that justifiably engage many scientists across the entire Department. Our members are making decisions on which meetings to attend based not only on the quality of the research being presented, but on the likelihood of receiving approval. We understand that some government scientists have even been declining speaking invitations and the opportunity to share their research because of the worry that approvals will not come through. We have also learned of instances when previously approved travel plans were cancelled at the last minute because of constantly changing policies. This shifting landscape for approvals is severely disruptive to the scientific enterprise and wasteful in time and resources.

Even when requesting travel approval many months in advance, government scientists often will not receive authorization until just before the meeting. This means that federal employees are forced to delay submitting their conference registration or making travel arrangements until the last minute. As a result, taxpayers are often forced to pay higher registration and travel costs because meeting attendees cannot take advantage of discounts for planning ahead—and conference sessions and lodging options can be sold out by the time they receive approval. Although meeting organizers like our Society will work to accommodate our federal colleagues to the extent possible, we must also devote more time and effort, leading to additional costs and uncertainty. Indeed, we are not even sure that one of the chief organizers for a large meeting we are hosting in 2014 will receive travel approval to attend the meeting she is organizing!

Our members have reported numerous examples of scientists employed by government agencies who have attended Genetics Society of America conferences in the past being unable to do so at all this past year because of the overly stringent approval process. Although we recognize the need for appropriate oversight, restrictions on federal employee travel are cutting government scientists off from the rest of the research community. This means not only that federal researchers will have a more difficult time keeping up with cutting-edge science, but also that the wider scientific community will miss the opportunity to learn about advances happening in government laboratories. Federal employees must also decline any speaking invitations extended after the approval deadline for a particular conference, further isolating them from the rest of the community.

The program directors who oversee federal research investments have also been unable to attend key conferences in the areas of research they sponsor. This means that they are less informed about

current breakthroughs and the latest scientific advances. They are also less accessible to the research community, which is an important responsibility for agency officials. One of our members shared the story of a symposium she helped organize at a major international scientific conference this past year. Even though the symposium was supported by an NIH conference grant, the responsible program officer overseeing the grant was not given permission to attend, nor was any other representative of NIH or the National Science Foundation (NSF), even though this was a major meeting for many NIH and NSF grantees. How can we expect agency officials to be responsible stewards of public funds if they cannot keep up with the latest research developments?

We have also learned of unfortunate effects on early-career scientists including graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. For example, several of our members at NIH have reported situations where they have been unable to send trainees to conferences, which are an essential part of their professional development as well as an opportunity to share their research. Scientific meetings are also a primary mechanism for trainees to connect with potential employers and mentors, which can help advance their career progression. NIH has also had difficulty at bringing in candidates for research positions, compromising the ability of NIH to recruit top scientists.

Finally, the Genetics Society of America would like to emphasize the detrimental effect that these regulations are having on the morale of scientists employed by federal agencies. These new restrictions are preventing government scientists from being full and active participants in the scientific community. We worry about the increasing difficulty federal agencies will have in recruiting top scientists to careers in government.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input into your deliberations about government support for travel and conferences. We would be happy to provide any additional information about the impact of these regulations on our community and the advancement of genetics research. Please contact GSA's Executive Director, Adam P. Fagen, PhD (301-634-7300; afagen@genetics-gsa.org), with any questions.



ABOUT GSA: Founded in 1931, the [Genetics Society of America](#) (GSA) is a professional scientific society with more than 5,000 members worldwide working to deepen our understanding of the living world by advancing the field of genetics, from the molecular to the population level. GSA promotes research and fosters communication through GSA-sponsored international conferences including regular meetings that focus on particular model organisms. GSA publishes two peer-edited scholarly journals: [GENETICS](#), which has published high quality original research across the breadth of the field since 1916, and [G3: Genes|Genomes|Genetics](#), an open-access journal launched in 2011 to disseminate high quality foundational research in genetics and genomics. The Society also has a deep commitment to education and fostering the next generation of scholars in the field. For more information about GSA, please visit www.genetics-gsa.org. Also follow GSA on Facebook at facebook.com/GeneticsGSA and on Twitter [@GeneticsGSA](https://twitter.com/GeneticsGSA).