

Amendment 3529 – Adds accountability, transparency and limitations to U.S. Department of Agriculture conference expenditures.

The amendment would require USDA to prioritize its conference spending by eliminating wasteful and perhaps unnecessary travel, and taking advantage of telecommunications advances which might allow conference participation via internet or satellite.

This amendment would cap USDA's conference spending at \$15 million annually and establish a series of reporting requirements for conferences that cost over \$20,000.

The amendment would result in savings of approximately \$4 million annually.

Oversight Investigations Have Found Some USDA Conference Spending to be of Questionable Value

Federal agencies have come under scrutiny for their lavish spending on conferences and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) is no exception. The agency recently reported to Congress that it has almost tripled its conference expenditures since the year 2000, to \$19.4 million in Fiscal Year 2006.

Some of these expenditures included sending employees to Las Vegas for "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" conferences, to elephant training conferences, and to resorts in Australia for conferences on mushrooms and crawdads.

One entity within USDA, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) sent 42 people (39 of whom were employees) to 14 conferences in Hawaii in 2006 at a cost of \$59,145, or an average of \$1,408 per traveler. The conferences took place on the Isles 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.

USDA Spending More and More on Conferences

USDA revealed to a Senate oversight subcommittee that it had spent more than \$90 million on conferences from 2000- 2006. Department conference expenditures increased more than \$4 million, or 60 percent, between 2001- 2002. The amount has more than tripled between 2001 and 2006, when conference expenses surpassed \$19.4 million.

USDA Conference Spending 2000-2006

Year	Amount reported in 2005	Amount reported In August 2006
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 ^[1]
Total	\$74,549,847	\$90,574,164

USDA Chief Financial Officer Admits that the Department Has Not Properly Tracked Conference Costs

In a 2006 exchange at a hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, USDA's Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Charles Christopherson disputed the accuracy of the conference funding numbers his agency submitted in 2005.^[2]

He informed the Senators 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.

^[1] Reported February 12, 2007.

^[2] "Round Two: Federal Agencies and Conference Spending," Senate Federal Financial Management Subcommittee hearing, September 14, 2006.

The CFO could not explain why, in just one year, the spending figures had been adjusted, including an \$8 million adjustment for 2005.

Despite spending \$18 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.”

This Amendment Does Not Cut USDA Funds, but Helps the Agency Better Prioritize Its Spending and Mission

The Department of Agriculture was created in 1862 under President 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.”^[3]

Conference spending comes out of various agencies' and offices' budgets. While the total overall conference expenditure for USDA equaled \$19.4 million in FY06, and this amendment would limit FY08 conference spending to \$15 million, it does not actually cut any funds from the agency.

In practice, USDA will still have the same budget authority that the underlying bill gives it, even if and when this amendment passes.

The agency just will not be able to spend any additional funds over the \$15 million limit on conferences. This is intended to have the effect of freeing up over \$4.4 million in funds that might otherwise have gone to conference spending to be redirected to higher priority initiatives related to the Department's mission.

^[3] About USDA, http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/lut/p/s.7_0_A/7_0_1OB?navtype=MA&navid=ABOUT_USDA.

This amendment doesn't cut USDA funds; it helps prioritize the agency's spending.

Las Vegas and Hawaii = Popular USDA Conference Sites

There are 112,000 employees at USDA, and in 2006, USDA sent 20,959 employees to thousands of conferences and meetings across the nation and around the world. The Department amassed a 191 percent increase in conference spending since 2000.

According to data submitted to a Senate oversight committee, 145 USDA employees attended approximately 94 separate conference or training events in Las Vegas in 2006.^[4]

Sixty USDA employees traveled to Hawaii on the taxpayers' dime in 2006, to attend approximately 28 separate conference or training events.

Farmers and Those Living in Rural America Have Needs that Should Take Priority Over USDA Employee Trips to Conferences

In recent years, American farmers and those living in rural America have faced serious economic issues, such as crop losses, drought, and other natural disasters.

The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry notes, "Today, rural communities face enormous challenges, with loss of population and jobs contributing to a negative cycle which feeds on itself. Investments in rural development can help reverse this dynamic."^[5]

According to USDA's Economic Research Service:

^[4] USDA's February 5, 2007 response to Ranking Member Coburn regarding FY2006 Conference and Training Activity, pages 1 through 254.

^[5] Summary of Rural Development Title of Farm Bill, The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry website, <http://www.agriculture.senate.gov/>

- Per capita income in rural areas is \$26,147; For urban areas, the per capita income is \$36,153.
- Average earnings per job in rural areas is \$31,596; For urban areas, that number rises to \$48,340;
- In rural areas throughout the U.S., 23.5 percent have not completed high school; in urban areas, that numbers drops to 18.8 percent.^[6]

Addressing these issues are clearly more important priorities for rural Americans than spending hundreds of thousands of dollars sending bureaucrats to conferences.

As farmers in Oklahoma and across the Midwest recover from record droughts, floods and fires, this Farm Bill must focus on core farm and ranch needs. Spending federal funds intended for agricultural and rural priorities on costly, excessive and unnecessary conference travel is not the most effective manner to advance these needs.

^[6] U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service website, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/US.htm> , accessed October 31, 2007