

**Statement of Nina Rose Hatfield
Deputy Assistant Secretary, Policy, Management and Budget
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management,
Government Information, and International Security
Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs
U.S. Senate**

Oversight Hearing on Federal Conference Spending

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Chairman Coburn and distinguished members of the Committee, I am Nina Rose Hatfield, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Business Management and Wildland Fire at the Department of the Interior. I am pleased to be here today to discuss conference spending by Interior.

The Department of the Interior is the nation's principal conservation agency. Our bureaus include the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Minerals Management Service, the United States Geological Survey, and the Office of Surface Mining. We are a large, decentralized agency with over 70,000 employees and 180,000 volunteers located at approximately 2,400 operating locations across the United States. The Department manages one in every five acres of the United States, and maintains some 40,000 facilities. We discharge our responsibilities on a \$16.4 billion total annual budget.

As manager of over 500 million acres, Interior has a mission that lies at the confluence of people, land, and water. How well we do our job at Interior affects whether:

- people have water in their homes;
- farmers can irrigate their fields;
- families can warm and cool their homes with affordable, reliable energy;
- Indian children enjoy educational opportunities;
- communities avoid risks from catastrophic fires and natural hazards;
- our children and grandchildren can enjoy the grand vistas of the Grand Canyon, or the geologic rainbows of Arches National Park; and
- habitats flourish for this Nation's diverse flora and fauna

As this Nation's premier land manager, our mission inevitably places us amid conflict as different people have diverse aspirations for these public lands. As guardian of thousands of buildings, roads, trails, research facilities, and scientific systems, our mission also triggers many basic management challenges.

In conducting our jobs we work closely with States, Tribes, and local communities particularly in seeking public input relative to our mission for the management of lands and resources. Much of our work involves meeting and collaborating with others. In the case of the U.S. Geological Survey, which is a science agency, there is a compelling need to work closely with academia. In many of our jobs, attending training and conferences is an important tool for employee development, learning, and sharing information.

I appreciate the Committee's efforts to ensure travel and conferences costs are limited to essential training and interaction with the public. That said I also believe that conferences, in certain cases, represent an indispensable tool for promoting sound policy development and practice. Good policy for lands all over the country cannot always be developed in Washington D.C.; there are times when interaction with impacted communities can help decision makers to identify options and craft more collaborative, effective solutions.

Our travel and conference budget is relatively small. In FY 2000, Interior obligated \$206.6 million on total travel and conference expenses, or 1.5% of its total obligations. In FY 2005 Interior obligated \$207 million or 0.9% of its total obligations. In 2000 dollars, this equates to \$185 million, or a 12% decrease. Of the FY 2000 total, conference registration fees totaled \$25 million. In FY 2005, that figure declined to \$23.5 million. Interior is committed to ensuring our travel dollars are maximized by limiting attendance at meetings and conferences, using teleconferencing and other alternatives to travel, and by taking advantage of cost efficiencies in travel.

Since our travel budget is relatively small, we do not have special systems or staff to track the information on conference attendance and costs at the level of detailed requested by the Committee. In FY 2004, at the request of the Interior Appropriations Committee we made a special effort of quarterly data calls to capture the costs of conferences where 30 or more Interior staff were in attendance. In FY 2004 these conference costs amounted to approximately \$6 million dollars or 3 percent of the total travel obligations for the bureaus covered under the Interior appropriations bill.

Attending and sponsoring conferences is part of our mission work and an important training tool as we face an increasing rate of retirements. Conferences are an excellent mechanism to share ideas, make contacts in your area of expertise, learn of new tools and technologies, and keep abreast of new legal requirements. Conferences sponsored by Interior bureaus cover such topics as Interagency Fire coordination, Law Enforcement coordination, regional mapping and species conservation. Frequently, representatives from State and local governments and non-profits active in the conservation arena are invited to attend.

This willingness to engage stakeholders on the ground is a key part of the cooperative conservation philosophy that the Department of the Interior is seeking to instill department-wide. Cooperative conservation is an approach to conservation that emphasizes the promotion of citizen stewardship and partnerships with States, tribes, and communities. Conferences are sometimes used to bring together citizens and decision

makers, facilitating the exchange of information on ways to protect and enhance wildlife, lands, and waters across the nation. Examples of conferences planned by Department of the Interior bureaus over the last two years that reflect the cooperative conservation approach are the BLM's New Mexico Lands Workshop and South Central Oregon Fire Conference, the Bureau of Reclamation's Conference on the Environmental Impact Statement for the Folsom Project, and the Fish and Wildlife Service's Maine Coastal Waters Conference.

I myself sponsor an annual conference. When I became Deputy Assistant Secretary it became clear that our managers needed to break out of their stovepipes and communicate with each other to improve our business management practices. The annual conferences are designed for managers from finance, property, budget and performance, asset management, human resources, information technology, and procurement/competitive sourcing business areas. The workshops included presentations and discussion opportunities on the Financial and Business Management System (FBMS) implementation, Homeland Security Presidential Directive-12, new requirements in OMB Circular A-123 and A-76, President's Management Agenda, EEO Management Directive-715 and CFR-1614 changes, FISMA, FASAB, Government Performance and Results Act, Enterprise Security Network, Activity-Based Costing, and OMB's Program Assessment Rating Tool. This year, approximately 300 people attended this 4 day conference held in March in suburban Baltimore, 60% of whom were staff from the DC area. The total cost was less than \$400,000. The information provided was current and specific to Interior. One conference is held in lieu of the numerous conferences that were conducted in the past for each management area. The conference also provides required training, CLEs, for procurement, finance, and other specialists. Conferences or classes provided by outside vendors would cost significantly more, often \$1,500 for tuition alone. I believe our conference to be a bargain.

Although I have emphasized my belief that conference spending can help to further the mission of the Department of the Interior, I also recognize your concern that all conference attendance and spending should be appropriately controlled. The Department of the Interior has made significant investments in technological infrastructure for video- and teleconferencing. We will continue to promote the use of electronic conferencing whenever possible to reduce the need for in-person attendance at training and professional meetings. In tough budget times, conference spending should be reviewed carefully to ensure that it is contributing to mission-essential work. Every effort must be made to promote a business-like approach to conference planning and to reduce agency costs.

Senior management already monitors conferences closely. The Department of the Interior has a longstanding policy requiring that conferences involving 30 or more employees be approved by the Program Assistant Secretary. Approval may be delegated not lower than the Deputy Assistant Secretary. Some bureaus have policies for approval of smaller meetings or attending conferences. This review ensures the conferences are mission related and that the location and timing of the conference are cost beneficial.

I regret that at this time I am unable to provide all of the information you requested concerning conference spending in the last two fiscal years. My staff is gathering detailed conference information through data calls to the bureaus. We will provide further information to you in the next few weeks.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my testimony. I would like to thank you again for this opportunity to discuss the Department of the Interior's activities and spending related to conferences. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.