

ARS CSREES ERS NASS

Bulletin

Title: Approval of Premium-Class Travel

Number: 07-311

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Originating Office: Travel and Relocation Services Branch
Financial Management Division, AFM/ARS

Distribution: All REE Employees

This Bulletin replaces REE Policy and Procedures Manual 343.1, Approval of Premium-Class Air Travel. The policy and procedures found in this Bulletin will be revised into a Policy and Procedures document after final guidance on approval of premium-class travel is provided by the Department. The procedures in this Bulletin **must** be used to obtain approval of any use of premium-class travel accommodations.

Authority

- Agriculture Travel Regulation (ATR), Chapter 301, Part 3
- Federal Travel Regulation (FTR), Chapter 301, Part 10
- Letter from Acting Secretary dated October 3, 2007

Background

On October 2, 2007, the Acting Secretary of Agriculture directed the United States Department of Agriculture agencies (USDA) to provide uniform guidance on the approval of premium-class travel. Additionally, the Acting Secretary delegated the authority to approve premium-class travel accommodations for official travel to the USDA Chief Financial Officer (CFO). (Attachment 1)

Policy

This bulletin replaces Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Policy and Procedures Manual 343.1, Approval of Premium Class Travel. All REE employees must meet the requirements contained in this Bulletin to obtain approval of premium-class travel accommodations for official travel.

The authority to approve all premium-class accommodations for official travel with the exception of upgrades to premium travel using frequent flyer miles or at personal expense is limited to the **USDA CFO** with the concurrence of the mission area Under Secretary. This approval is necessary for the purchase of first-class or business-class accommodations on any common carrier, whether airline, train, or ship. Premium-class travel is defined as any accommodation providing service above coach-class, most commonly first-class and business-class accommodations.

It is USDA and REE policy to approve use of premium-class accommodations for official travel only when employees (see Glossary for definition of employee) meet one or more of the criteria listed on the USDA Form “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel” (Attachment 2) and provides the required justification. This new policy includes:

- Authorization for the use of first-class and business-class accommodations for official travel is made on a case-by-case/trip-by-trip basis. This includes employees who request first-class or business-class accommodation for reasons pertaining to medical conditions, physical limitations, or special needs. (Any employee, who previously received a “blanket” approval for medical condition, physical limitation or special needs, until further notice, must submit a request for the use of premium-class accommodations on a case-by-case/trip-by-trip basis.)

- Employees may request authorization to use first-class and business-class travel accommodations **only** for the reasons listed on the USDA Form “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel.” The form must be accompanied by the documentation listed for each justification. No approval will be granted without this form.
- All requests for the use of first-class accommodations must be made in advance. To ensure sufficient time for approval, requests should be made at least 30 days in advance of travel. Post-approval of the use of first-class or premium-class accommodations cannot be guaranteed. Purchase of premium-class tickets without prior approval may result in the employee being personally responsible for the cost.
- Any emergency situation where the employee needs immediate approval should be directed to the Chief, Travel and Relocation Services Branch (TRSB) who will attempt to secure verbal approval from the Department. This approval, again, cannot be guaranteed.
- When the requesting premium-class accommodations to meet a medical condition, physical limitation, or special need, the employee must meet the requirements of REE Policy and Procedures Manual 122.2, Reasonable Accommodation Procedures. The supervisor must certify the request in writing and must retain medical documentation that is dated within six (6) months of the request. The supervisor forwards their certification of the documentation only and retains medical certification. Supervisors may need to produce the medical certification upon request from the USDA CFO.
- When requesting use of premium-class transportation for direct travel to locations outside the continental United States, and the scheduled flight time is in excess of 14 hours, the traveler must provide evidence that they are required to report to duty immediately following the flight with no rest. Such requests must justify the use of premium-class as opposed to allowing an earlier arrival, using coach-class accommodations and providing a rest day for the employee.

Use of Frequent Traveler Benefits

FTR §301-10.123 and §301-10.124 allow travelers to upgrade to first-class and business-class accommodations at their personal expense, including through the redemption of frequent traveler benefits (FTB). REE employees may upgrade to first-class or business-class accommodations at their own expense or through the use of FTB **if the upgrade is made at no additional cost to the agency.** Upgrades to first-class and business-class accommodations using personal funds or through the use of FTBs do not require agency approval. *Note: The use of FTBs to upgrade class of service **does not** relieve the employee from the requirement to book all official travel through the agency mandated Travel Management System. Any upgrades must be made directly with the airlines after procuring coach-class tickets through the USDA travel management service.*

Procedures for Agricultural Research Service (ARS)

- Employee prepares a letter of justification, with the accompanying USDA Form “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel.” The Form and any documentation required by the Form must accompany any request. If the request is for a medical reason, attach a medical certificate, which will be retained by their supervisor, dated within six (6) month of the request.
- The employee obtains the proper approvals through the following levels of management (as applicable):
 - **Research Leaders (RL's)/Location Coordinators (LC's)/Immediate Supervisor.** Review justification from traveler and ensure reasons given for use of first-class and business-class service meet policy guidelines. Retains medical justification and attaches a letter certifying that the request for premium-class travel accommodations meets the requirements. Forwards the request to Administrative Officer (AO), for further processing.
 - **Administrative Officers (AO).** Review justification and ensure RL/LC has recommended approval. Coordinate processing with the Deputy Area Director (DAD).
 - **Area Budget and Fiscal Officers (ABFO's)/Area Transportation Assistants (ATA's).** Review justification. Coordinate processing with DAD and Area Director (AD)/Division/Staff Director.
 - **Area/Division/Staff Directors.** Review justification. Recommend approval/disapproval. If approved, forward to the Director, Financial Management Division (FMD), through the Chief, TRSB, FMD, for processing.
- TRSB, FMD, reviews justification from AD/Division/Staff Director, ensures current policy criteria have been met, and prepares a decision memorandum for the approval of the Administrator, ARS, to the Under Secretary, REE.
- Undersecretary, REE, reviews request, signs “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel” and forwards request to USDA CFO for approval.

Procedures for National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS):

- Employee prepares a letter of justification, with the accompanying USDA Form “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel.” The Form and any documentation required by the Form must accompany any request. If the request

is for medical reason, attach a medical certificate, which will be retained by their supervisor, dated within six (6) month of the request.

- Obtains the approval or recommendation of the State Statistician, Headquarters Division Director, or other appropriate official. The State Statistician, Headquarters Division Director or other appropriate official retains the medical justification and attaches a letter certifying that the request premium-class travel accommodations meets the requirements.
- The State Statistician, Headquarters Division Director or other appropriate official prepares a decision memorandum from the Administrator, NASS to the Under Secretary, REE. Submits request and decision memorandum to the Associate or Deputy Administrator.
- Undersecretary, REE, reviews request, signs “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel” and forwards request to USDA CFO for approval.

Procedures For Economic Research Service (ERS):

- Employee prepares a letter of justification, with the accompanying USDA Form “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel.” The Form and any documentation required by the Form must accompany any request. If the request is for a medical reason, attach a medical certificate, which will be retained by their supervisor, dated within six (6) month of the request. Forwards request to their Division Director.
- Division Director prepares and forwards a decision memorandum from the Administrator, ERS, for the approval of the Under Secretary, REE.
- Undersecretary, REE, reviews request, signs “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel” and forwards request to USDA CFO for approval.

Procedures For Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES):

- Employee prepares a letter of justification, with the accompanying USDA Form “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel.” The Form and any documentation required by the Form must accompany any request. If the request is for medical reason, attach a medical certificate, which will be retained by their supervisor, dated within six (6) month of the request. Forwards request to their Division Director.

- Forwards the above information to:

USDA, ARS, AFM, FMD, TRSB
Room 552 Portals Building
1400 Independence Ave., SW, Stop 0315
Washington, D.C. 20250-0315

- TRSB prepares a decision memorandum from the Administrator, CSREES, for the approval of the Under Secretary, REE. The memorandum must be reviewed by the applicable Deputy Administrator and initialed prior to approval by the Administrator, CSREES.
- Undersecretary, REE, reviews request, signs “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel” and forwards request to USDA CFO for approval.

Summary of Responsibilities

Under Secretary, REE

- Approves the use of all first-class and business-class accommodations for official travel, sign the USDA Form “Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel” and forwards request to USDA CFO for approval.

REE Administrators

- Reviews the requests for the use of first-class and business-class accommodations for official travel, and forwards requests on which they concur to the Under Secretary, REE.

Director, FMD

- Reviews requests for first-class and business-class accommodations, and forwards requests to the Undersecretary, REE, on behalf of the Administrator, ARS.

ARS Area Directors, AFM Division Directors/NASS Division Directors, State Statisticians/ERS Division Directors/CSREES Deputy Administrators

- Approve traveler's justification for request to use first-class and business-class accommodations for official travel.
- ERS Division Directors prepare decision memorandum.

ARS Research Leaders/Location Coordinators

- Review justification for first-class and business-class accommodations for official travel from traveler and recommend approval or disapproval.

ARS Area Budget and Fiscal Officers/Area Transportation Assistants

- Review justification. Coordinate processing with Deputy Area Director and Area Director (AD)/Division/Staff Director.

ARS Administrative Officers

- Coordinate the processing of the request for first-class and business-class accommodations for official travel with the DAD.

TRSB, FMD

- Review justification and prepare decision memorandum for ARS and CSREES.

Traveler

- Prepares justification for use of first-class and business-class travel.
- NASS traveler prepares decision memorandum.
- Obtains approval from appropriate levels of management.

Glossary

ABFO. Area Budget and Fiscal Officer.

AD. Area Director.

ATA. Area Transportation Assistant.

ATR. Agriculture Travel Regulations.

Business-Class. A first-class and business-class of accommodation offered by the airlines that is higher than coach and lower than first-class, in both cost and amenities. This class of accommodation is generally referred to as “business, business elite, business first, world business, connoisseur, or envoy” depending on the airline.

Common Carrier. Private-sector supplier of air, rail or bus transportation.

DAD. Deputy Area Director.

Disability. A person having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, or having a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as

having such an impairment; but does not include an individual who is currently engaging in the illegal use of drugs, when the covered entity acts on the basis of such use.

Employee. An employee is an individual employed by an agency regardless of status or rank; or an individual employed intermittently in Government service as an expert or consultant and paid on a daily when actually-employed basis; or an individual serving without pay or at \$1 a year; or a person on invitational travel orders.

First-Class. The highest class of accommodation offered by the airlines in terms of both cost and amenities and termed “first-class” by the airlines and any reservation system.

FMD. Financial Management Division.

FTB. Frequent Travel Benefits.

FTR. Federal Travel Regulations.

Invitational travel. Authorized travel of individuals either not employed or employed (under 5 U.S.C. 5703) intermittently in the Government service as consultants or experts and paid on a daily when-actually-employed basis and for individuals serving without pay or at \$1 a year when they are acting in a capacity that is directly related to, or in connection with, official activities of the Government. Travel allowances authorized for such persons are the same as those normally authorized for employees in connection with TDY.

AO. Administrative Officer.

LC. Location Coordinator.

Major Life Activities. Functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.

Premium-Class Travel. Preferred seating offered by the airlines and other common carriers that is higher than coach-class in both cost and amenities. Generally, premium-class travel is either: (1) business-class (also know as “business, business elite, business first, world business, connoisseur, or envoy” depending on the carrier), or (2) first-class (or similarly named service) which represents the highest class of service provided by the airlines and other common carriers.

Physical or Mental Impairment. (1) Any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological, musculoskeletal, special sense organ, respiratory (including speech organs), cardiovascular, reproductive, digestive, genitourinary, hemic and lymphatic, skin, and endocrine; or (2) Any mental or psychological disorder (e.g., mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness and specific learning disabilities). (3) The term “physical or mental impairment” includes, but is not limited to, such diseases and

conditions as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, mental retardation, emotional illness, and orthopedic, visual, speech and hearing impairments.

RL. Research Leader.

Special Need. Physical characteristics of a traveler not necessarily defined under disability. Such physical characteristics could include, but are not limited to, the weight or height of the traveler.

TRSB. Travel and Relocation Services Branch, AFM.

/s/

Steve Helmrich
Director
Financial Management Division

2 Attachments



DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

OCT 02 2007

TO: Subcabinet Officials

FROM: Charles F. Conner
Acting Secretary

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Conner".

SUBJECT: Authorization Process for Business Class or First Class Travel

As we have discussed in previous Subcabinet meetings, the Department encourages the most economical mode of travel by discouraging business class travel and generally prohibiting first class travel.

The USDA Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chuck Christopherson, has been reviewing the travel policies within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for amendment and reissuance. In a recently completed audit, it was found that USDA agencies were not consistent in their application of Departmental travel policy when justifying the required need for premium class travel. In response to this recent audit, I have asked the CFO to complete the review of the travel policy within the next 10 days.

Pending completion of the CFO review and a new travel policy, the following interim policy applies to approval of all government-funded premium class travel:

1. All premium class travel, with the exception of upgrades to premium travel using frequent flyer miles or at personal expense, must be authorized by the CFO; and
2. Premium class travel for the CFO must be authorized by the Chief of Staff.

To request authorization for premium class travel, please provide the supporting materials as required by the attachment. All requests must be first approved by the Subcabinet Official or other General Officer. This attachment must be completed and **approved in advance** of booking the trip. In accordance with applicable document retention guidelines, approved requests must be retained for 6 years and 3 months.

The Office of the Chief Financial Officer will provide you with additional information pending review of the travel policy. All questions may be directed to Chuck Christopherson, CFO at 202-720-5539.

Attachment

Attachment 2

Department of Agriculture
 Authorization for Use of First and Business Class Travel

Request #: _____ Traveler's Name: _____
 Request Date: _____ Travel Dates: _____
 Request By: _____ Length of Trip: _____
 Agency: _____ Destination(s): _____

No.	✓	Justification Required	Documentation ¹
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	Regularly scheduled flights only provide first or business class accommodations.	Documentation that no coach seating is offered on that flight and an alternative flight is not available.
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	No space is available in coach class accommodations in time to accomplish the mission, which is urgent and cannot be postponed.	Explanation of why flight is so urgent, why the traveler's schedule cannot be adjusted, and/or why the meeting cannot be adjusted.
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use of business class is required to accommodate a disability or special need.	In accordance with DM 4300-2, disability must be substantiated in writing by a medical authority and provided to the supervisor. Certification from the supervisor must indicate other than coach travel is required. Documentation must be dated within the prior 6 months of travel or must be a permanent disability. Disability cannot be accommodated using a cheaper alternative method (example: two coach seats). ²
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	Security Purposes.	Documentation of security issue.
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use of first or business class results in cost savings to the Government.	Cost comparison.
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	Where the origin and/or destination are outside the continental United States (OCONUS), and the scheduled flight time, including stopovers and change of planes, is in excess of 14 hours. Rest periods for sleep or extended relaxation may not be taken during or immediately following the flight.	Documentation of flight time and need for first or business class. Travel schedule showing traveler reporting for duty immediately following the flight with no rest.
7	<input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptional circumstances.	Full documentation of the exceptional circumstances (e.g., documentation of sanitation issues). The presumption is these will generally be denied.

(If approved, the signed, approved form must be included as part of the travel authorization.)

Footnotes:

- 1- Documentation must be attached to this form. 2- Supervisor note would be attached to this form and the travel authorization.

Under Secretary or General Officer Signature: _____

Decision

- Approved
 Denied

Approving Official: _____ Date: _____