

# A WORD ABOUT ETHICS

## SERVING WITH NON-FEDERAL ORGANIZATIONS

### SERVICE IN A PERSONAL CAPACITY

**May a Federal employee serve with or be active in a non-Federal organization, such as a professional society?**

- Yes, under most circumstances. However, when the organization has agreements, contracts, issues, projects, or other matters before the employee's office and the employee holds a position or is "actively involved" with the organization in a private capacity the employee cannot work on matters as an agency employee in which the organization has an interest or is a party (or represents a party) unless specific approval is given.
- "Actively involved" means that the employee is doing more than merely paying dues or attending meetings, such as organizing organization projects.

**When is approval to participate available?**

- If the employee is active but does not hold a position as an officer or director, approval to participate is available if the needs of the agency outweigh appearance concerns. The employee should contact the Ethics Law and Programs Division in such cases.

### SERVICE IN AN OFFICIAL CAPACITY

**Can an employee serve with a non-Federal organization in an official capacity as part of his or her Government duties?**

- Yes, but currently only in limited circumstances:
  - as a liaison to the organization (not as an officer or member of its governing board),
  - as a member of the governing board of a standards-setting organization (if the position includes standards-setting responsibilities), and
  - if the employee's service is specifically provided for by statute.

**If service as an officer or board member will serve an agency purpose, is it allowed?**

- No, under current law and policy; however, a change in the law has been proposed and service with outside organizations as a board member or officer as part of an employee's Government duties may be permitted in the future.

ETHICS LAW AND PROGRAMS DIVISION  
OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT GENERAL COUNSEL FOR ADMINISTRATION  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

202-482-5384 – [ethicsdivision@doc.gov](mailto:ethicsdivision@doc.gov) – [www.commerce.gov/ethics](http://www.commerce.gov/ethics)

January 3, 2012