

GovTrip Questions and Answers

March 17, 2010

NOTE: The following are the GovTrip team’s responses to a number of questions that we frequently heard as we gathered and analyzed data from more than 100 stakeholders across USDA. Please note that these Questions and Answers (Q&As) are not intended to provide an overview or guide for using GovTrip. If you would like GovTrip classroom training, please click on the following link: <http://www.aqlearn.usda.gov/>. In the near future, you will also be able to view a self-service training webinar, located on the Office of the Chief Financial Officer’s Controller Operations Division’s Web site (<http://cod.nfc.usda.gov/>).

For additional information on GovTrip, or if you require assistance in resolving problems, please go to the GovTrip Help Desk Web page for points of contact within your agency or office (click on the following link: <http://www.govtrip.com/qovtrip/site/section.jsp?sid=6>; select “Department of Agriculture” from the “Change Edition” button at the top of the page; click on “Help Desk” in the left-hand menu; then scroll down the page to find the contact for your agency).

We ask that you continue to submit additional comments or new ideas for improving GovTrip by visiting the USDA Cost Savings Ideas Web site (click <http://costsavings.usda.gov/> and log in via USDA e-Authentication).

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Airfare Cost

Why can't I get lower-cost airline tickets on GovTrip, like the ones I can book on Web sites such as Expedia and Orbitz?

A: We've learned there are two issues that made it hard to find lower-cost airfares in GovTrip, and have made changes to fix them:

- In the past, USDA policy allowed agencies to request an annual waiver to "switch on" access in GovTrip to "restricted fares" (e.g., non-refundable) like those found on commercial Web sites. Approximately half of USDA's agencies implemented the policy making these fares available to approximately 70 percent of employees. In an effort to expand access to restricted fares, on December 17, 2009, OCFO issued a new policy offering all agency/office heads the option to approve the use of restricted fares. Twenty-three of our 25 agencies and offices have now approved use of these fares (see attached "USDA Agencies Using Restricted Fares" to see which agencies/offices are new users of these fares). In choosing to do so, they have agreed to manage the additional financial risk posed by the use of restricted fares (e.g., not reusing unused, non-refundable tickets before they expire or the ticket owner/employee departs Federal service, incurring fees charged for cancelling/changing trips).

Please note that this change will make available only some of the restricted fares seen on travel Web sites such as Expedia, because GovTrip uses only one of the four flight search engines offered commercially. There is work underway to explore the cost and technical feasibility of using more search engines.

We ask you to please use restricted fares judiciously. They are particularly useful when your travel is certain or unused tickets can be used easily. Please also follow Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) requirements:

- Use these tickets only when at least one of the following FTR exceptions is met:
 - Space is not available on the contract carrier;
 - The flight is available to the general public and is lower cost than the contract carrier; or
 - The contract carrier's schedule is inconsistent with your agency's explicit written policies related to scheduling travel during normal working hours.

And don't forget to report unused tickets to your agency or office's travel staff, and use those with expiration dates for official travel before they expire.

- In the past, flights with the lower-cost "unrestricted" government ("Capacity Controlled City Pair" contract carrier) fares negotiated by the General Services Administration (GSA) were shown far down the list of options displayed when travelers and travel arrangers searched for flights in GovTrip. Folks often didn't

know to look for them. On December 17, 2009, we changed the GovTrip system to make it easier to find these lower-cost flights by displaying them first in the search results. (One of our agencies already used this view). Some of these fares are similar to those shown on commercial sites. When you log into GovTrip now, flights will be shown in the following order:

- Under the “Government” Airfare Tab
 - Capacity controlled City-Pair fares (shown in yellow);
 - Regular GSA contracted City Pair fares (shown in green);
 - Unrestricted non-contract fares (shown in grey); and
- NOTE: If your agency has approved use of restricted fares, you’ll also see under the “Non-Government” Airfare Tab
 - Restricted non-contract fares (shown in blue-gray – the same color as other non-government contract fares)
 - When comparing fares under the “Non-Government” airfare tab, please note that government-contracted fare quotes are generally for one-way tickets, while restricted fares quotes are for round-trip tickets

Why don’t our Travel Management Centers (TMCs) (e.g., SATO) offer us lower ticket prices?

A: The ticket prices available in GovTrip and to our five TMCs are not controlled by TMCs or GSA. Rather, they are the fares bid by the airlines under contracts with GSA. GSA annually holds a contract competition with airlines for reduced airfares on routes most frequently used by Federal employees. See our [Q&A](#) about the changes we’ve made to provide access to lower-cost airline fares in GovTrip.

GovTrip System Use and Challenges

Why isn’t GovTrip more user-friendly? What’s being done to improve it?

A: Many of us have problems using the system, especially infrequent users. We have been working steadily to make changes with Northrop Grumman, GSA, and other agencies and departments that use GovTrip. Nearly 60 USDA-recommended improvements have been made to date. The release of GovTrip 2.0, projected for June 2010, will include more, along with other improvements such as:

- New screen “prompts” that guide infrequent users through the authorization, approval, and vouching processes; and
- A “power user” short-cut which allows frequent users (both travelers and travel arrangers) to go directly to specific tasks/screens on the Web site, rather than navigating to them through the standard sequence of tasks/screens.

We are awaiting Northrop Grumman’s implementation of many additional changes that we requested. As described in these Q&As and the March OCFO GovTrip e-mail about our team’s work, we are making changes under USDA’s control to improve system usability when feasible.

We are also making cross-USDA GovTrip training widely available over the next several months (this is in addition to the agency-specific training offered periodically by some agencies). We have conducted a number of classes since December, and participants tell us that the training is very beneficial. We hope that you'll be able to significantly reduce your frustration with GovTrip by participating in classroom or one-on-one training, or quickly reviewing our Webinar and/or "cheat sheet" quick tips on our soon-to-be-released GovTrip user Web site. You can register for classes online in AgLearn by clicking on the following link: <http://www.aglearn.usda.gov/>, then searching for "GovTrip" in the Search Catalog Field (upper right section of the screen). Additional classes will be added as needed. We will also send out a notice when our Web site is launched.

Why does GovTrip lock me out (e.g., when I click the browser "Back" button or close a window incorrectly)?

A: This system issue has been fixed by an enhancement which took effect January 9, 2010.

Why is GovTrip so slow?

A: While GovTrip may occasionally experience delays during peak usage periods, the majority of the problem lies with USDA's networks, telecommunications, and firewalls. GovTrip's performance and response times have improved significantly since major upgrades were made in 2009 to its platform technology. An additional upgrade is near implementation. The primary problem now is the network performance issues in some USDA agencies related to browser and firewall security settings and equipment capacity. These are being identified and addressed. If GovTrip freezes, it is possible that either the GovTrip or eAuth system has malfunctioned. If you need help in this situation, please notify your agency's or office's travel staff who can at least determine the source of the problem.

Cost of Using GovTrip

Isn't the cost of using GovTrip higher than our previous processes (e.g., travel fees and commissions, travel voucher fees)?

A: The online booking and vouchering fees in GovTrip are more than 30 percent lower than our previous process of booking through USDA's contracted TMCs. Prior to GovTrip, these fees were part of the ticket price and not transparently listed as a separate fee. In addition to costing less, GovTrip provides USDA with an online, auditable transaction and payment process, which also reduces our overall travel costs.

Why can't I use my own travel agent, or make reservations myself online?

AND

Why do we have to use GovTrip for international travel? It's more expensive.

AND

Why can't I book hotels myself when traveling locally and unsure of the city in which I'll arrive by day's end?

A: The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and FTR requires departments to use GovTrip or another GSA Electronic Travel Service (ETS) for official travel. This allows the government to implement consistent procedures, increase compliance with travel policies (including the Fly America Act for international travel), standardize reporting, and improve responses to Freedom of Information Act requests.

Travel Authorizations, Travel Vouchers, Audits

Why does it take so long to get travel authorizations approved in GovTrip?

AND

Why does it take so long to get reimbursed for my travel in GovTrip?

AND

Why does GovTrip require pre-audits?

A: Delays are due to: (1) travel approvers not reviewing and approving travel authorization and travel vouchers quickly; (2) user errors, budget, or other issues that cause the travel authorizations and travel vouchers to be rejected by the system; (3) pre-audits or (4) in the case of long-term travel, a system requirement that prior vouchers be processed before a subsequent voucher can be reimbursed. The system itself works instantaneously when an approver clicks "approve" to approve a travel authorization or travel voucher. Once travel vouchers are approved, it usually takes no more than 48 hours for the payment to process. To reduce these delays, we are:

- Encouraging travel approvers to act more rapidly or delegate approval authority to a manager who can do so. We are also working to make the approval process more user-friendly. And we are exploring the feasibility of providing access via BlackBerry to make it more convenient for approvers who frequently travel;
- Offering more training;
- Working to speed the resolution of "rejects" and assessing the feasibility of requesting a system change so that a reject notification goes to the party who can resolve it, not just the traveler; and
- Reducing "pre-audits" by increasing the dollar threshold for travel authorization requests or travel vouchers that require pre-audits reviews by the approving official before they can continue the routing for approval (e.g., we no longer require pre-audits for authorizations or travel vouchers that are under per diem). We did retain the current threshold for pre-payment audits of travel vouchers more than \$5,000. Pre-audits generally take up to 10 business days.
- Providing travel managers with a "work-around" process for long-term travel so that an approved voucher can be reimbursed while a prior voucher is still in the process of error resolution or pre-audit review.

Why do I have to print and submit my travel authorizations and travel vouchers on paper?

A: This is less a system issue than a human issue – some authorizing officials, their staffs, and travel preparers don't know how to use GovTrip's electronic approval system, do not know they can do so, or aren't accustomed to electronic processes. Some officials believe paper approvals are faster for them because they are constantly on the road with limited access to the system, or have hectic meeting schedules that leave them little time to go online at their computers. They can't access GovTrip on their BlackBerry to approve travel documents. And GovTrip's voucher approval process is not fully user-friendly. We have identified those who are requiring paper approvals and are working with them to see what can be done to accelerate approval time (e.g., improving the approval process, training, delegating approval to a manager who can access the system regularly, and exploring the feasibility of providing access via BlackBerry).

What's being done to reduce approval delays, which often result in higher travel costs?

A: GovTrip holds flight reservations for up to four days before departure dates for the government-contracted "City Pair" fares on unapproved travel authorizations if the traveler or travel arranger clicked "Sign" when submitting these authorizations for approval. This helps some travelers, but not all. We are striving to resolve the primary causes for delays. First, we are working with Northrop Grumman to resolve and prevent system issues that cause delays.

Second, to address delays caused by user error (e.g., entering incorrect information), we are providing [training](#) to reduce this problem. This training, along with our one-on-one work with managers, will put increased emphasis on swift review of travel authorizations.

Third, we are working to reduce delays caused when some approving officials, their staffs, and travel preparers require approval requests to be submitted on paper. The [question](#) "Why do I have to print and submit my travel authorizations and travel vouchers on paper?" addresses this issue.

Why does GovTrip require more authorizations than pre-GovTrip?

A: In the past, USDA frequently used blanket authorizations to authorize travel for groups of employees. While many trips could be authorized at a time, the lack of detailed information did not support accurate accounting, standardized reporting, FTR compliance, or detailed responses to Freedom of Information Act requests. The lack of detail could also result in misunderstandings between travelers and approving officials over what expenses were and were not authorized. Additionally, some agencies failed to follow the authorization process in the past. For these reasons, USDA has put increased emphasis on the use of trip-by-trip travel authorizations.

We have also reviewed current authorization routing chains in GovTrip to ensure they are up-to-date. If you believe your GovTrip authorization routing chain is incorrect, please contact your agency's or office's travel staff.

Why is it so difficult to make changes in GovTrip, like changing reservations or credit cards?

AND

Why do I have to cancel my reservation in order to make a change?

AND

How do I avoid losing the flights I want in the cancelling/making a new reservation process?

A: The difficulty in modifying reservations is due to GovTrip, its "booking engine," and the Global Distribution System in which the airlines feed their inventory of available flights. The good news is that GovTrip 2.0 will allow the modification of reservations that haven't been ticketed for up to three days before the departure dates. It will also allow travelers and travel arrangers to check out flights and fare availability without requesting an authorization first. Until then, you can contact your TMC to help you make changes. They are able to check on the availability of the flights you want before canceling your reservation and making a new one. That reduces the chance of losing the flights you want.

Can I submit a travel voucher for my local travel through GovTrip rather than WebTA?

AND

Why can't all local travel be vouchered/reimbursed through WebTA or legacy travel system (TRVL) since it doesn't charge processing fees?

A: GovTrip should not be used for local travel at this time. Local travel is reimbursed through the Web Time and Attendance system (webTA), legacy travel system (TRVL), or direct payments through the financial system. Your agency travel staff can assist you in determining the preferred method of reimbursement for your office.

What's that \$13.50 charge that shows up on my credit card after I've submitted a travel voucher for approval? Do I have to submit another travel voucher to get reimbursed for it?

A: The \$13.50 voucher processing (TAV) fee is the cost that Northrop Grumman charges for using GovTrip to process travel vouchers. This fee is reimbursable to you and, once approved, is added automatically to the reimbursement total of your voucher as an expense. You are charged when the travel voucher is approved and submitted for payment. Travelers with government travel charge cards will see the fee on their monthly travel charge card statement listed as "GOVTRIP TAV," followed by the travel authorization number "OP####." (Please note that this charge could be on a later statement than your other trip charges if you submitted your voucher after you completed travel.) Those travelers using a centrally billed account, rather than individually billed account, will not see these charges.

Entering Traveler Profile Information

Why can't I add date of birth and gender to GovTrip for the Secure Flight data?

A: Fields to enter travelers' dates of birth and gender has been added to GovTrip to comply with Transportation Security Administration's Secure Flight requirements. There are three ways that this information can be entered into the traveler's profile:

- A GovTrip traveler can update his/her own profile;
- A travel arranger can update a traveler's profile in a travel document. These data are then saved to the permanent profile; or
- A GovTrip Federal Agency Travel Administrator (FATA) with the appropriate system access level can update the profiles of travelers in the Travel Administrator (TA) Maintenance Tool.

GovTrip Reports

Why doesn't GovTrip offer the management reports I need?

A: We are working with the Travel Policy Users Group to review the 41 reports available in the GovTrip system, fix any problems accessing them, train users on use of the data, and request additional reports from Northrop Grumman, if necessary. Please see the attached "Existing GovTrip Reports" for a list of reports currently available. Your agency's or office's FATA with the appropriate system access level can obtain these reports.

How To Get More Info or Help

Whom should I contact if I have questions or problems with GovTrip?

A: For help resolving problems, please go to the GovTrip Help Desk Web page for points of contact for your agency or office: *(click on <http://www.govtrip.com/govtrip/site/index.jsp>); select "Department of Agriculture" from the "Change Edition" button at the top of the page (if you haven't already set it as your default version); click on "Help Desk" in the left-hand menu; then scroll down the page to find the contact for your agency).* For information or questions about GovTrip, please contact your agency's or office's travel staff (see attached "USDA TPUG Points of Contact"). We are working closely with them, and they will inform us of new issues that need to be resolved. We hope to launch in April 2010 our USDA GovTrip Web site, where you'll have one-stop source of information about GovTrip.