



July 20, 2023

**United State
Department of
Agriculture**

Office of the Chief
Financial Officer

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Independence
Avenue, SW
Stop 9050

Washington, DC
20250

TO: Subcabinet Officials
Chiefs of Staff
Agency Heads
Staff Office Directors
Chief Operating Officers
Agency Chief Financial Officers
Senior Accountable Travel Officials
Travel Policy Users Group

FROM: Ethel M. Butler
Acting Associate Chief Financial Officer
Financial Planning and Policy
Office of Chief Financial Officer

SUBJECT: Agriculture Conference Management (AgCM)

The Department remains committed to ensuring USDA programs are delivered efficiently, effectively and with integrity and a focus on customer service. The Department's participation in conferences, operational meetings and training activities should further USDA missions and objectives; represent an efficient and effective use of taxpayer funds; and withstand public scrutiny. In expectation of a more constrained FY2024 budgetary outlook, mission areas, agencies and staff offices are cautioned to continue to exercise discretion and judgment in ensuring conference related expenses are appropriate, necessary, and managed in a prudent manner, regardless of the whether the USDA attends, hosts, or sponsors an event.

A few years ago, the Department shifted to a simpler, more risk-based approach to conference management (AgCM) by simplifying terms and rules and raising the approval thresholds, while also vesting in senior leadership's discretion and judgment to prudently manage participation in events. As part of the improvements, we mandated use of the automated Agriculture Conference Management System (AgCMS) to manage the program.

Consistent with prior years, a detail of planned events for the next fiscal year must be approved by the Mission Area Under Secretary (or delegate) by the end of August and submitted to the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) for consolidation; the OCFO will then forward the combined plans to the Deputy Secretary for approval. As in prior years, these actions will be accomplished in AgCMS. Once the combined USDA plan is pre-approved by the Deputy Secretary in AgCMS, essentially only departures from the plan require further explanation or approval, subject to overall spending plans that may be communicated.

This memorandum is a reminder of the policies and procedures which remain in effect until rescinded or superseded by subsequent guidance/instructions.

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1. Mission Areas, agencies, and staff offices are directed to use the new AgCMS and Users Guide (or other OCFO provided templates) for conference planning, event approval, and reporting requirements, without regard to any dollar threshold.
2. As indicated in the Agriculture Travel Regulation, mission area, agency and/or staff office annual conference plans must be uploaded and approved in AgCMS no later than August 31st. These plans must be approved by the Senior Accountable Travel Officials (SATO), Agency/ Staff Office Heads and Mission Area Under Secretary (or those Acting in these positions).
3. The plans must include a list of any conference, training, or operational meeting event the agency/staff office plans to participate in (host, sponsor, or attend), whether in person or virtually, for the upcoming fiscal year, based on these thresholds:

Include on plan in AgCMS if estimated (aggregate) expenses = / >	
Event Type	Est. Expense
Conference	\$20,000
Training	\$20,000
Operational	\$250,000

4. If there is a need for an exception to this policy (i.e., participation in an event which was not included on the pre-approved plan), subsequent approval is needed by the Department's Chief Financial Officer (CFO); the CFO will elevate to the Deputy Secretary's office as needed.
5. Each USDA agency is required to have a Senior Accountable Travel Official to ensure timely and accurate reporting to the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and OCFO.
 - a. Mission areas, agencies and staff offices should confirm (or forward) their SATO information to the OCFO by August 31st. The SATO responsibilities should be fulfilled by those serving as the Deputy Administrator for Management, the Chief Financial Officer, Deputy Director of a Staff Office, and/or equivalent positions.
 - b. SATO duties include:
 - (1) Design a records management methodology to maintain correspondence related to AgCM and be able to quickly correlate financial and non-financial records. A copy of the documented methodology and procedures shall be filed with OCFO upon creation and when subsequently modified.
 - (2) Design and document the internal controls and cost tracking procedures to ensure accurate and timely reporting. The internal controls shall be tested annually to assess control design and operating effectiveness and the reports required by this section shall be considered key financial reports under

Appendix A, "*Management of Reporting and Data Integrity Risk*" of OMB Circular A-123 "*Management's Responsibility for Enterprise Risk Management and Internal Control.*"

6. High-level Internal Reviews

Members of the Subcabinet have the responsibility for ensuring prudent spending and classification events, with transparency in mind. The mission areas will have a pre-approved plan for major events each year and should use discretion and judgment, to manage their plan, while ensuring trips of a high-profile nature are aggregated for approval and required reporting. Members of the Subcabinet should:

- a. Review AgCMS status reports to compare the total count and total dollar amount of pre-approved events to that of the actual year-to-date count and dollars
 - b. Review details on events that were not pre-approved.
7. The requirement to aggregate costs for approval and input to AgCM for certain types of trips, including any trips with an estimated cost less than \$20,000, is eliminated.
NOTE: AgCMS also serves as a repository; therefore, mission areas, agencies and staff offices *may* aggregate and enter any event into the system, regardless of estimated expense total.
8. The USDA must continue to carefully plan and oversee participation in conferences, operational meetings, and training activities to properly manage taxpayer resources and receive the greatest return on our investments. Examples of cost saving strategies to reduce expenses in these areas include:
- a. Reducing/limiting individual participation to 1-2 events annually
 - (1) Implement a competitive process for selecting attendees
 - (2) Utilize peer training
 - (3) Encourage virtual attendance where possible
 - b. Strategic planning to capitalize on early/reduced registration fees
 - c. Encouraging joint events to increase efficiencies
 - (1) Streamline training events by region
 - (2) Remove individual State meeting; participate in more efficient nationwide events
 - d. Selected locations near the majority of participants
 - e. Host conferences in USDA-owned or government-owned-facilities
9. As per 41 CFR, [Chapter 301-74.2](#) when planning a conference, you should consider direct and indirect conference costs paid by the Government, whether paid directly by

USDA (a mission area, agency or staff office), or reimbursed by the USDA to travelers or others associated with the conference. Examples of costs to consider are:

- a. Authorized travel and per diem expenses
 - b. Hire of rooms for official business
 - c. Audiovisual and other equipment usage
 - d. Computer and telephone access fees
 - e. Light refreshments
 - f. Printing
 - g. Promotional Material
 - h. Registration fees and
 - i. Ground transportation, and
 - j. Employee' time at the conference and enroute travel
10. The attached documents further detail the AgCM streamlined approach and updated requirements.

Questions on this memorandum can be referred to Elvis Tull, the Acting Fiscal Policy Division Director, at Elvis.Tull@usda.gov.

Attachment A

USDA Conference Management (AgCM) – Streamlined Approach

Item / Topic	Requirement										
<p>Annual Plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due by August 31st each year • Use updated definitions (included) to determine how to categorize events • Include conference and training events on plan if estimated expenses exceed \$20K; include operational meetings if estimated expenses exceed \$250K <table border="1" data-bbox="667 579 1105 827" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="2" style="text-align: center;">Include on plan in AgCMS if estimated (aggregate) expenses = / ></th> </tr> <tr> <th style="text-align: center;">Event Type</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Est. Expense</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Conference</td> <td style="text-align: center;">\$20,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Training</td> <td style="text-align: center;">\$20,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Operational</td> <td style="text-align: center;">\$250,000</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires SATO, agency/staff office head, and USEC signatures • Must be completed/approved in (uploaded into) the USDA Conference Management System (AgCMS) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The AgCMS Users Guide contains specific instructions on how to complete this requirement • Mission Areas and Agencies/Staff Offices are required to consolidate/scrub their lists before submitting to the OCFO • OCFO submits list of event names to SAP Concur for upload into ConcurGov <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mission areas, agencies and or staff offices will need to provide a separate list of other events (under \$20K/\$250K) to include in ConcurGov (for events not included on the annual plan) 	Include on plan in AgCMS if estimated (aggregate) expenses = / >		Event Type	Est. Expense	Conference	\$20,000	Training	\$20,000	Operational	\$250,000
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<p>Individual Event Approval Request</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the event was pre-approved on the annual plan, and there is no substantial increase in estimated expenses (= or <20%), complete the Location Cost Worksheet in AgCMS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It may be easier to obtain info for the LCW by completing the Attendee Detail Cost Analysis Spreadsheet (which is no longer required to be submitted with the request) • Approved in AgCMS based on approval thresholds <table border="1" data-bbox="631 1623 1268 1892" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: center;">Threshold Value</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Required Approver</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">>\$450,000</td> <td style="text-align: center;">USDA Deputy Secretary</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">\$75,000 - \$449,999</td> <td style="text-align: center;">General Officers / Under Secretaries</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">\$40,000 - \$74,999</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Agency/Staff Office Head or SATO</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">\$0 - \$39,999</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Agency/Staff Office Head, SATO, or Delegated Authority</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Threshold Value	Required Approver	>\$450,000	USDA Deputy Secretary	\$75,000 - \$449,999	General Officers / Under Secretaries	\$40,000 - \$74,999	Agency/Staff Office Head or SATO	\$0 - \$39,999	Agency/Staff Office Head, SATO, or Delegated Authority
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the event was pre-approved, and there IS a substantial increase in the estimated expenses (= or >20%), submit an approval memorandum and location cost worksheet via AgCMS to receive approval for the increased expense amount • If the event was not pre-approved on annual plan, submit an approval memorandum and LCW to the OCFO for an 'exception to policy' approval • For events where estimated expenses exceed \$450K <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Forward requests for Deputy Secretary approval through the OCFO (via AgCMS) 																				
<p>Reporting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use AgCMS to report actual expenses after the event <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Consult the AgCMS Users Guide for specific instructions <p>For your information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>OMB -17-08</u> requires the USDA to <u>post</u> on our public website annually by January 31 all agency sponsored (hosted) conferences >\$100,000. The report must indicate the agency approvers name and rationale for approving conferences >\$500,000. • <u>The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-334, Sec. 12611)</u>, also called the Farm Bill, requires the USDA to publish a Conference Transparency Report annually, by January 31st, of all conferences >\$50,000. • <u>Section 738, Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023</u> requires the USDA to provide <u>the</u> OIG (annually) a report of conferences held (agency sponsored) >\$100,000. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <15 days after each quarter, notify the OIG of any conferences held (agency sponsored) >\$20,000 <table border="1" data-bbox="662 1251 1237 1486"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="4">Reportable if expenses = / ></th> </tr> <tr> <th>Event Type</th> <th>Host</th> <th>Attend</th> <th>Sponsor</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Conference</td> <td>\$20,000</td> <td>\$50,000</td> <td>\$100,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Training</td> <td>\$20,000</td> <td>\$50,000</td> <td>\$100,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Operational</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>N/A</td> <td>N/A</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Reportable if expenses = / >				Event Type	Host	Attend	Sponsor	Conference	\$20,000	\$50,000	\$100,000	Training	\$20,000	\$50,000	\$100,000	Operational	N/A	N/A	N/A
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Attachment B

Description of Events and Trips with Requirements

CATEGORY and REQUIREMENTS	DISCUSSION OF TERMS AND DEFINITIONS
<p>OPERATIONAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggregate for Approval: Yes, Per Table A • Input to AgCMS: Yes, if >\$250,000 • Reportable: No • Potential Operational Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ State Director Meetings ○ Trade Shows ○ Cochran/Borlaug Events ○ Scientific Exchange Programs ○ Advisory Committee and Board Meetings 	<p>Trips, meetings, and events organized substantially to coordinate or execute USDA business are operational.</p> <p>Indicators that a trip, meeting or event MIGHT NOT BE operational would include, an obvious training purpose; no obvious operational objective; more networking than work related; hosted events with significant numbers of non-USDA attendees; very large numbers of people traveling, e.g., in the hundreds; use of non-government experts providing information; outside advertisements or invitations to non-USDA people; or use of non-government facilities. Nothing precludes an event from being operational because it has one or more of the indicated features; however, if it does, management should use extra discretion and judgement in challenging the operational classification. The trip might be training or a conference, both of which are not precluded, merely classified differently.</p> <p>When USDA personnel travel to another USDA location to meet with other USDA personnel, contractors, or consultants, to manage getting the work done, this IS clearly operational.</p> <p>When a relatively select number of people travel to meet with prospective or existing USDA business partners and leaders, e.g., country officials, farmers, trade groups, boards, etc., to manage getting the work done, negotiate deals, implement IT systems or controls, or perform a key activity designed to accomplish a milestone USDA mission, this IS clearly operational.</p>
<p>TRAINING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggregate for Approval: Yes, Per Table A • Input to AgCMS: Yes, if >\$20,000 • Reportable: Yes, if <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hosted - >\$20,000 ○ Attended - >\$50,000 ○ Sponsored - >\$100,000 • Potential Training Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ AGA PDT ○ BIG NTI 	<p>Trips, meetings, and events organized substantially to dispense new or additional orientation and training are “training.” This does not apply to off-site meetings focused solely on the internal logistics, such as “who, what, when, where, how, or why” of getting future work done,” e.g., a strategy session. Such sessions are operationally oriented.</p> <p>Indicators that a trip, meeting or event is MOST LIKELY training, would include agendas with technical or non-technical training and education content likely to be claimed by professionals</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Farm Bill Training ○ GSA SmartPay Training Forum ○ SNAP (E&T) Meeting ○ Federal Dispute Resolution ○ Management Concepts ○ FEI and OPM courses 	<p>reporting continuing education; ala carte agendas of optional speaker choices taking place simultaneously; technical accounting training; soft skills training, non-technical workplace, or people education and training; ethics training; organized presentations about new or emerging rules, laws, bills and regulations necessary to understand to properly execute programs.</p> <p>If a passerby or attendee would plainly observe people in the room were receiving targeted training on one or more relevant topics, then it is training. Use discretion and judgment.</p>
<p>CONFERENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Aggregate for Approval: Yes, Per Table A ● Input to AgCMS: Yes, if >\$20,000 ● Reportable: Yes, if <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hosted - >\$20,000 ○ Attended - >\$50,000 ○ Sponsored - >\$100,000 ● Potential Conference Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Microsoft Ignite ○ Membrane Conference ○ Blackhat ○ NextGen Conference 	<p>Trips, events, and <u>meetings that are not organized substantially</u> for operational or training purposes are conferences.</p> <p>If the attendance of government employees is incidental to the purpose of the meeting, (i.e., government employees attend the meeting to work the registration table or to give a speech or lecture), but federal employees do not participate in conference events or activities, then the event would not be a conference.</p>

TABLE A: Approver Thresholds

Threshold Value	Required Approver*
>\$450,000	USDA Deputy Secretary
\$75,000 - \$449,999	General Officers / Under Secretaries
\$40,000 - \$74,999	Agency/Staff Office Head or SATO
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- * - Or person Acting in this capacity
- General Officers, as defined in 7 CFR 2.4
- Agency/Staff Office Head refers to Department level Agency and Staff Office Heads (as listed on the USDA website)