TO: Subcabinet Officials

FROM: Stephen L. Censky  
Deputy Secretary

SUBJECT: USDA Conference Planning

At USDA, we are committed to meeting the Department’s first strategic goal: to “ensure USDA programs are delivered efficiently, effectively, and with integrity and a focus on customer service.” One aspect of this commitment is ensuring that our conference participation and group training/travel activities are strategically planned, meticulously reviewed, and effectively executed.

Conference participation, group travel, and training can be effective tools for building a high-performing workforce, maximizing program execution, and ensuring that USDA properly engages with stakeholders and partners. However, we must carefully plan and administer these activities to ensure we are accurately managing taxpayer resources and receiving the greatest return on our investments.

Between FY16 and FY18, USDA spent an average of $17.8M on 791 conferences and training events. The estimated expenditures for FY19 are currently $26.3M for 953 events, representing increases of approximately 32 and 17 percent in USDA’s overall costs and number of events, respectively. Further review shows that some agency expenses and number of events have increased by over 50 percent as compared to prior years.

To date, Mission Areas through their Business Centers or other internal organizations have been responsible for the submission of conference plans to the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO). However, due to inconsistencies in the number and type of events agencies include on their fiscal year plans, we have determined that further improvements are needed to empower Mission Areas to more effectively and efficiently manage USDA’s conference and group travel/training activities. Thus, we are instituting a phased approach aimed at enhancing the strategic planning process for Mission Area conference and group travel/training activities that leverages and builds upon the execution and planning processes around conference/training events from 2018.

Phase I – FY19 Q3 and Q4
Phase I requires the Mission Areas to review and revalidate their FY19 Quarter 3 (Q3) and Q4 Conference and Training Plans (CP) which outline planned conference and training group travel activities for these two quarters. These plans are to include those activities captured under previously required plans (i.e., $10,000 and above), as well as activities outlined in this memo.
MEMORANDUM
Page 2

Each Under Secretary will be expected to review and approve the FY19 CP for their Mission Area and is charged with identifying ways to reduce overall costs in this area. Some examples to consider are:

- Reducing/limiting number of agency attendees at events;
- Encouraging joint events to increase efficiencies;
- Limiting individual participation to 1-2 events per year; and/or
- Capitalizing on early registration to take advantage of special rates.

The Q3 and Q4 CPs are to be submitted to Stan McMichael, Associate CFO for Financial Policy and Planning (ACFO, FPP), via email at stanley.mcmichael@usda.gov by April 5, 2019.

Following submission, the ACFO, FPP, will conduct meetings with each Mission Area designee to review the CP. The purpose of this review is two-fold: (1) to ensure that agencies are strategically planning conferences and travel with a focus on improved efficiency, effectiveness, and program integrity; and (2) assist with developing Mission Area presentations to the Deputy Secretary. The Q3 review will focus on the justification for Q3 CP items. The Q4 review will include the Q1 through Q3 burn-rate to date, as well as the justification for Q4 CP items. The Mission Area designee should contact the ACFO, FPP to schedule a review appointment. 

**Phase II – FY20 Q1 thru Q4**

Phase II will focus specifically on the FY20 CP and include the requirements listed under Phase I. As such, each Under Secretary will be expected to review and approve the FY20 CP for their Mission Area and submit the CP to Stan McMichael by August 15, 2019. The ACFO, FPP, will similarly conduct meetings with each Mission Area designee to review the CP and assist with developing their presentation for the Deputy Secretary. The Mission Area designee should contact the ACFO, FPP, to schedule a review appointment. 

As with FY19, the ACFO, FPP, will conduct quarterly reviews with the Mission Area designee to discuss the previous quarter expenditures and confirm the events scheduled for the remainder of the fiscal year. The first review for FY20 will cover FY19 Q4. A CP template is located at www.ocfo.usda.gov/travel-express/ConferenceTrainingTemplates. In addition to the template, you are welcome to submit a PowerPoint presentation or other documentation that further explains the planning and strategy contained in your CP.

**Definition of Conference Participation and Group Travel**

To ensure a consistent understanding and application of what constitutes a conference under this new approach, below are the definitions that USDA will utilize.
Title 41 Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) 301-74 defines conference:

Conference—A meeting, retreat, seminar, symposium or event that involves attendee travel. The term "conference" also applies to training activities that are conferences under 5 CFR 410.404.

§410.404 Determining if a conference is a training activity. Agencies may sponsor an employee’s attendance at a conference as a developmental assignment under section 4110 of title 5, United States Code, when—

(a) The announced purpose of the conference is educational or instructional;

(b) More than half of the time is scheduled for a planned, organized exchange of information between presenters and audience which meets the definition of training in section 4101 of title 5, United States Code;

(c) The content of the conference is germane to improving individual and/or organizational performance, and

(d) Development benefits will be derived through the employee’s attendance.

Further, Section 14209(a)(3)(A) of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2255b(a)(3)(A)) as amended) retains criteria which identifies a conference and is applicable in order to submit the annual Conference Transparency Report:

1) Conference events sponsored or held by the Department of Agriculture for which the Department awarded a procurement contract;

2) The term "conference" means a meeting that:

(a) is held for consultation, education, awareness or discussion;
(b) includes participants from at least one agency of the Department of Agriculture;
(c) is held in whole or in part at a facility outside of an agency of the Department of Agriculture; and involves costs associated with travel and lodging for some participants and does not include any training program that is continuing education or a curriculum-based educational program, provided such training program is held independent of a conference of a non-governmental organization.

The following table illustrates how these definitions should be incorporated in the CP.

Attachment
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference: Must be included in CP</th>
<th>Not a Conference: Not included in CP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Event:</strong></td>
<td>Any event that does not meet all four criteria to the left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) The event is a meeting, retreat, seminar, or symposium that involves Federally funded attendee travel (non-local), <strong>AND</strong></td>
<td>Examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Includes participants from at least one agency of the Department of Agriculture, <strong>AND</strong></td>
<td>- Employee(s) attend local event that does not incur non-local travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Involves costs associated with attendee travel and per diem, <strong>AND</strong></td>
<td><strong>Group Meeting:</strong> Attendance of employee(s) is incidental to the purpose of the meeting (i.e., employees attend the meeting to work the registration table) AND employees do not participate in conference events or activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Includes any of the following indicators:</td>
<td>Examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Requires registration and/or registration fees</td>
<td>- Employee(s) gives a speech or lecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Has an established hourly agenda and/or brochure</td>
<td>- Employee(s) promoting USDA services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Requires audio/visual support, printing, room/facility rental, and/or speaker and translation fees</td>
<td><strong>Training:</strong> Classroom or instructor-based certification and/or job training of Federal staff to become proficient or qualified in one or more areas of responsibility (i.e., from OPM, FEI, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Is advertised internally or externally</td>
<td>Examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Has a scheduled speaker or discussion panel</td>
<td>- Employee attends training that is local and does not incur non-local travel and lodging, such as:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Examples:**
  - Agricultural Outlook Forum
  - To Bridge a Gap
  - FSA/RD State Leader Conference
  - Professional Agricultural Workers Conference

- **Examples:**
  - American Geophysical Union Fall Meeting
  - National Frontline Supervisors Meeting
  - State Engineers and State Resource Conservationist Joint Meeting

- **Examples:**
  - Conflict Resolution Skills with OPM
  - Crisis Leadership with FEI
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference: Must be included in CP</th>
<th>Not a Conference: Not included in CP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employees attend training that meets all four criteria, such as:</td>
<td>– Appropriations Law for Federal Grants at Management Concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– American Iron and Steel-Engineer Training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– SNAP Employment and Training National Forum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Blacks in Government National Training Institute</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Federally Employed Women National Training Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Mission (Operational) is not a type of conference, as defined by regulation.

If you have any questions regarding the memorandum or attachment, please contact Lynn Moaney at lynn.moaney@usda.gov or (202) 720-0727.

CC: Ray Starling, OSEC
    Joby Young, OSEC
    OSEC Senior Advisors
    Agency Chief Financial Officers
    Mission Area Chiefs of Staff