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**Written Testimony of Beth F. Cobert  
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before the  
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee  
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Thank you, Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Coburn, and members of the Committee, for the invitation to discuss travel and conference spending activity in the Federal Government. Today, I will mainly focus on the efforts to reshape how conferences are conducted in the Federal Government.

As stewards of taxpayers' dollars, the Federal Government must spend money wisely as well as find improvements and efficiencies in fiscal oversight. One of the ways this Administration has sought to save taxpayer money is by both reducing administrative costs, such as travel, and strengthening controls around conference activities. Over the last several years, this Administration has reduced conference spending in the Federal Government by rethinking how and why conferences are conducted as well as by increasing our use of technology such as video-conferencing and webinars in order to reduce travel costs. I will discuss further these actions and other agency initiatives in my testimony.

While the Administration has taken important steps to reduce conference spending, it is critical to recognize the important role that conferences play in the Federal Government. Conferences enable the sharing of knowledge among large groups and bring together dispersed communities. They facilitate collaboration and often spark innovation, such as the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Sovereign Challenge Conference. The USSOCOM Conference allowed an opportunity for international participants to engage in discussions of threats to national sovereignty, explore possible solutions and best practices, encourage individual and cooperative actions, and build relationships with and among international attendees. The face-to-face interaction afforded by the conference proceedings spurred further collaboration that assisted USSOCOM in achieving its mission

Additionally, there are times when physical collocation is both helpful and necessary. This is often the case with the scientific community. For example, conferences allow all levels of the U.S. science and engineering (S&E) community to connect, from established experts presenting cutting-edge work to graduate students beginning their career. The primary goal for an S&E conference is to bring a community of scientists and engineers together and provide opportunities for interaction and collaboration. The result of a 2004-2005 survey of over 1000 scientific conference attendees published in The Scientist Magazine indicated that: (1) over two thirds of respondents reported learning something that changed the direction of their research; (2) over half reported learning something at the meeting that had saved them time and money in their own work; and (3) sixty percent reported that their meeting attendance led to a new collaboration. Conferences can and do produce important results.

Furthermore, convening Federal employees and external stakeholders at a single location sometimes can be the most efficient and cost-effective means for carrying out

Government-sponsored activities. Examples include: presentation of scientific findings, oversight boards or advisory group meetings, and standards-setting committees. Several agencies, such as the Department of Health and Human Services rely on such conferences with industry and academic colleagues to drive innovation and ensure continued advancement in related fields. In reviewing research at conferences, the Federal S&E employees and program managers not only stay abreast of their Federal Research and Development investment portfolios but also see significant cost savings in lieu of performing multiple site visits to each research performer's laboratory.

It is important to reiterate that while conferences can perform useful functions, conference related spending, as well as all administrative spending, must be managed in a responsible way. This Administration has taken several steps to ensure we are managing our spending effectively. Examples include:

- In June 2011, the Administration made the Chief Financial Officers accountable for each agency's share of the \$2.1 billion in administrative cost savings identified in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 Budget through Executive Order 13576, "Delivering an Efficient, Effective, and Accountable Government."
- In September 2011, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) required all agencies to conduct a thorough review of their conference-related activities and expenditures by issuing OMB Memorandum-11-35, "Eliminating Excess Conference Spending and Promoting Efficiency in Government."
- In November 2011, the Administration required agencies to reduce administrative costs by no less than 20 percent below 2010 spending levels in categories such as travel, IT devices, printing, executive fleet, and promotional items through Executive Order 13589, "Promoting Efficient Spending."
- In May 2012, OMB expanded upon efforts to reduce administrative costs by requiring a 30 percent reduction in travel spending as compared to 2010 levels, and imposed additional limitations and policies related to conferences by issuing OMB Memorandum-12-12, "Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations."
- In May 2013, OMB clarified the importance of conferences and provided best practices in managing conference cost in an era of fiscal constraint by issuing a Controller Alert, "CONTROLLER ALERT: Travel and Conferences."
- In December 2013, the General Services Administration (GSA) provided clarification on defining a conference in GSA Bulletin FTR 14-02, "Clarification of Agency Reporting Requirements for Conferences," to ensure we are reviewing and reporting on conferences and not on mission critical co-location events that were never meant to be included in the requirements.

Our efforts are paying off. In FY 2013, agencies reduced travel costs by \$3 billion compared to FY 2010 levels. While we are happy to see costs reduced, we will continue our efforts to maintain efficient spending. Agencies will continue to hold their travel spending to 30 percent below FY 2010 levels – unless the agency can show that certain reductions would undermine critical government functions such as national security, international diplomacy, health and safety, law enforcement, and site visits for oversight or investigatory purposes. To

maintain this lower level of spending, agencies are evaluating and rethinking how they conduct conferences that have resulted in several innovative collaborations. For example:

- The Department of the Treasury achieved \$181 million in travel savings in FY 2013. This was accomplished by: implementing more restrictive guidance and approval requirements for hosting and attending conferences; increasing the use of IT enhanced tools such as video conferencing for in-person meetings, training, and conferences; reducing the number of employees attending conferences, reducing the number of participants attending training events; and, canceling multiple annual conferences.
- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reduced FY 2013 travel spending by \$35 million when compared to FY 2010 levels. EPA continues to: (1) focus on increased use of technology such as video-conferencing, webinars, teleconferencing and collaboration tools; (2) use Government-owned space and scheduling of back-to-back meetings to reduce expenses; and (3) ensure that only essential travel is conducted, participation at conferences and meetings is appropriate, and that the number and frequency of face-to-face meetings and conferences hosted by EPA is limited to only the most essential gatherings. EPA issued internal guidance on travel and conference-related spending that ensures strict adherence to policies and controls.
- The Department of Interior (DOI) achieved \$99 million in FY 2013 travel savings as compared to FY 2010 levels. A comprehensive program is in place to manage conference activities and spending, including close scrutiny of all conferences based on DOI policy, and Deputy Secretary/Associate Deputy Secretary review of all conferences over \$100,000. DOI also continues efforts to increase the use of technology in lieu of travel, modify relocation policies and practices to reduce costs, and monitor travel ceilings and conferences using internal controls.
- The Department of Labor reduced travel spending in FY 2013 by \$29 million when compared to FY 2010 levels. This was accomplished by reducing site visit travel by substituting the site visits with desk reviews, electronic meetings and enhanced risk analysis; increasing the use of video-conferencing and webinars rather than face to face meetings; and, increasing the combining or co-scheduling of meetings in the same geographic area.
- The Department of Defense (DoD) reduced spending on hosting conferences with a total cost of more than \$100,000 by \$69 million or 78 percent in FY 2013 when compared to FY 2012 – spending \$20 million in FY 2013 vs. \$89 million in FY 2012. This was accomplished by hosting only 78 conferences with a total cost of more than \$100,000 in FY 2013 as opposed to 295 conferences in FY 2012. Consistent with OMB direction, DoD focused on instituting robust conference oversight procedures, combining previously separate conferences, cancelling many conferences, and increasing visibility through the implementation of a new, centralized conference tracking/reporting tool that was integrated with the Defense Travel System.

The Administration remains committed to responsibly managing conference activities and ensuring that conference spending across the Government supports mission critical activities. It is imperative that the Federal Government continue to improve how we conduct business and provide services to the American people while increasing public transparency. It is also imperative that our efforts not undercut or prevent agencies from achieving their mission or

create new significant cost in an effort to be compliant with conference review and reporting requirements. Moving forward, we are continuing to sharpen our understanding of both the value of conference attendance to mission critical Departmental activities and the opportunities to reduce expenditures - both of which are central to continued good stewardship of the taxpayer dollar.

In my private sector experience we faced similar issues in how to balance spending dollars in the best way possible on conferences and travel. I see the same need within the Federal Government, and look forward to using what I learned in my prior position to help expand the progress agencies are already making in reducing travel and conference costs.

Thank you again for the invitation to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.