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It Pays For Scientists to Travel, Former Researcher Argues at U.S. House Hearing

 by Yudhijit Bhattacharjee on 27 February 2013, 2:00 PM | [10 Comments](#)
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It helps to have a scientist in the House. Especially in the U.S. House of Representatives. Rush Holt, the physicist-turned-Democratic congressman from New Jersey, proved that this afternoon at a hearing where he vigorously defended the need for scientists to travel to conferences.

The [Committee on Oversight and Government Reform](#) called the hearing to evaluate steps taken by the Obama administration to curtail wasteful expenditure on travel. Various government agencies, including science agencies, have had to cut down on travel by employees and the sponsorship of meetings since last May when the White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a memo imposing government-wide restrictions. The memo was a response to a scandal surrounding a 2010 conference organized by the General Services Administration in Las Vegas where attendees were treated to expensive extras, including sushi and artisanal cheese.

"As a scientist, I know firsthand how important scientific conferences and meetings are," Holt told the committee [in his written testimony](#). "The informal conversations, as well as the formal presentations and poster sessions that go into a conference among scientists from different institutions lead to new collaborations that have the promise of new discoveries. These are not fancy junkets."

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Holt spoke out against the OMB memo as well as provisions in the proposed Government Spending Accountability Act, which is currently under consideration by the oversight and reform committee. It would make the current travel prohibitions permanent and introduce new limits. According to a fact-sheet released by the committee, government agencies spent more than \$267 million hosting or sending employees to 767 conferences in fiscal year 2012. The Department of Health and Human Services, which includes the science-heavy National Institutes of Health, spent \$56.1 million on 140 conferences. NASA spent \$2.29 million on 14 conferences.

"Many of the insights that have driven our understanding of science forward in recent years have been possible only through the collaboration of dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of scientists scattered across the globe," Holt said. "But the fact remains that many insights are possible only because of close, personal interactions among scientists who see each other regularly: those who do not work at the same university or laboratory must rely on interacting with each other at conferences. Proximity matters, in science as in every other field."

To drive home his point, Holt asked the committee if Congress could be expected to function if lawmakers were prevented from making trips to Washington, D.C. "Would you propose that the legislative branch -- you and I -- remain in 435 separate locations never to see each other, communicating and voting by email? It could save hundreds of expensive trips each week to do that, but don't you think the country would be worse for it?" he asked.

Just to be clear, that was a rhetorical question.

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