Testimony of Representative Rush Holt (NJ-12)

Before the United States House of Representatives

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, U.S. Postal Service and the Census

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Lynch, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the importance of federal travel and conference spending. Proposed legislation and administrative rule making would make significant changes to Federal employees' ability to travel to conferences and meetings. As a professional scientist and now a Member of Congress, I testify today with firsthand knowledge of how scientific innovation – especially that which is developed from the sharing of ideas at conferences – contributes to every American's quality of life.

As we work to ensure oversight on travel expenditures, we also should work to preserve the many benefits of appropriate travel, which can promote collaboration and innovation. Many scientists, for example, receive federal grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF), Department of Energy (DOE), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and others. These scientists rely on federal funding to travel to conferences in order to share thoughts, collaborate, and learn from their peers in order to advance understandings and create innovations.

Both the Government Spending Accountability Act (H.R. 313) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) May 2012 guidance, regrettably, initiate prohibitions and impediments that would hinder American scientists' ability to collaborate and communicate with scientists at other institutions and laboratories.

As a scientist, I know firsthand how important scientific conferences and meetings are. 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.

What's so special about science? Why does it work? Well, it works because one of its fundamental tenets is communication.

To be sure, there are various ways to have communication, but scientific conferences are critically important. In a recent op-ed by the presidents of the American Chemical Society and the president of the American Physical Society, they discuss, for example, an anticancer drug that was the result of collaboration between a team of scientists from three laboratories that took place at conferences.

The obstacles this bill creates would hinder that kind of collaboration. For the American Chemical Society (ACS) alone, the Society's biannual meetings "each attract on average 13,000 chemists and chemical engineers…and draw about 800 federal scientists. Under the new rules and the pending legislation, 50 percent of those federal scientists could be cut off from the global chemistry community that participates in ACS meetings."[1] The Division of Plasma Physics of the American Physical Society (APS) meets each year with hundreds of engineers and scientists from around the country on Department of Energy contract as well as hundreds who are not on DOE contracts. I know firsthand the meetings are invaluable in developing future energy sources. Countless other societies, laboratories, and universities would be impacted by the effects of these proposed changes.

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.

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. Would you propose that the legislative branch – you

[1]Shakhashiri, Bassam Z. and Byer, Robert http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/economy-a-budget/248553-federaltravel-restrictions-will-hamper-innovation-stunt-economic-growth#ixzz2LYwxYgJH September 10, 2012

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?

I am hopeful that this oversight legislation and administrative guidance would be modified to allow further scientific progress, instead of obstructing the sharing of ideas and information by eliminating travel and conference funding.

Weakening collaboration is not wise. This is not the way to build our economy. We should be investing more in research and development, which means, of course, investing in scientists, but also investing in their ability to pursue science.

We should be spending more on the conferences like those which promote innovation in microbiology, physics, chemistry, and a myriad of other scientific subject areas. These instances are not wasteful spending, but instead are examples of federal investments in innovation and economic development.