

# Science Policy Office

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[www.agronomy.org](http://www.agronomy.org) | [www.crops.org](http://www.crops.org) | [www.soils.org](http://www.soils.org)

Dear members,

The following important message and action request from the American Association for the Advancement of Science is critical to the advancement of science and, more specifically, each of you. Attendance at scientific meetings by federal employees is becoming more restrictive. This in turn impacts each of you – fewer opportunities to engage with your federal colleagues and partners, fewer of your colleagues at sessions, fewer opportunities for beneficial connections, and fewer opportunities for students to meet leading scientists and potential employers. I urge you to [share your stories](#) of how connections at scientific meetings have been the start of new discoveries that are benefitting society!

Sincerely,  
Ellen Bergfeld  
CEO  
ASA, CSSA, SSSA

## Meeting of the minds: Send your stories

James F. Albaugh, Joseph R. Haywood, James A. Jefferies, Toyohiko Yatagai

The path from Gila monster venom to the diabetes medication Exenatide runs through an American Diabetes Association meeting in 1996. There, Department of Veterans Affairs researcher, endocrinologist, and Golden Goose Award winner Dr. John Eng presented results on how a compound in Gila monster venom affects insulin production, catching the attention of a small biotechnology company, Amylin Pharmaceuticals. After receiving U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval in 2005, the resulting drug Exenatide is now used by millions of people to manage Type 2 diabetes.

The story of Dr. Eng and Amylin is just one of many—spanning all science and technology disciplines—that exemplify the important role of conferences in advancing science, developing the next generation of scientific talent, and bringing new technologies and potential cures to the benefit of society.

In 2012, the White House Office of Management and Budget instituted new government-wide regulations (1) that substantially cut spending on conference participation and travel and require the senior leadership to review agency-wide conference costs that exceed \$100,000, with more stringent requirements for costs in excess of \$500,000. At current prices for travel and lodging, this would cover the cost of only a few hundred attendees, whereas the Departments of Defense and Energy each employ over 100,000 scientists and engineers either directly or as contractors. The U.S. Congress has further limited travel to international conferences to 50



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employees per agency for most agencies. In response, federal agencies have developed costly tracking and approval systems, and approvals now often require more than a dozen signatures.

Under these new restrictive regulations, members of the scientific community employed by federal agencies have been subject to approval processes that have ballooned from weeks to as much as 9 months, and some scientists and engineers are now choosing not to request travel at all. The Government Accountability Office (2) and White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (3) have shown that this has led to reductions in conference participation among these colleagues, to the detriment of science as a whole.

This is why we and our colleagues in the science and technology community recently wrote a letter to the U.S. Congress expressing our deep concerns about the stifling impacts of these policies on science and engineering, and encouraging them to act (4). The letter was signed by more than 100 organizations and institutions that collectively represent and support millions of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians.

Tell us about a collaboration that started at a conference and led to an exciting new discovery, or how an interaction at a conference was critical to your career as a young scientist or engineer. Because current regulations affect federal employees and contractors most, we especially encourage stories that involve collaborations with colleagues at national labs or research institutes. Submit your experiences at [www.aaas.org/yourstory](http://www.aaas.org/yourstory) (5).

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

- (1) Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget M-12-12, "Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations" ([www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2012/m-12-12.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2012/m-12-12.pdf))
- (2) U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Defense science and technology: Further DOD and DOE actions needed to provide timely conference decisions and analyze risks from changes in participation," GAO Highlights (2015); [www.gao.gov/assets/670/668845.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/668845.pdf)
- (3) L. Rein, "How the federal travel crackdown hits scientists especially hard," Washington Post, 25 March 2015; [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/wp/2015/03/25/the-white-house-asked-federal-scientists-how-bad-its-crackdown-on-travel-is-the-answer-bad/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/wp/2015/03/25/the-white-house-asked-federal-scientists-how-bad-its-crackdown-on-travel-is-the-answer-bad/)
- (4) Letter to Senate Appropriations Committee ([www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/SApprops%20S%26T%20Conference%20Travel%20Letter.pdf](http://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/SApprops%20S%26T%20Conference%20Travel%20Letter.pdf))
- (5) AAAS, publisher of *Science*, led the above-referenced letter to the U.S. Congress and is also hosting the story collection.

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