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House OKs cutting agency travel costs

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The fiscal 2005 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill -- passed last week by the House of Representatives -- contains an amendment limiting to 50 the number of federal health employees allowed to attend international conferences.

Likewise, the fiscal 2005 foreign operations spending bill, approved by the House in July, contains an amendment that would limit attendance of State Department employees at international conferences to 50.

Both amendments, sponsored by Rep. Scott Garrett, New Jersey Republican, were approved without dissent.

"My constituents often ask me why Congress continues to spend so much, despite the fact that we have a deficit and an ever-growing national debt," said Mr. Garrett, a member of the Budget and Financial Services committees. "The amendments represent common sense and fiscal discipline."

In debate on the amendments, Mr. Garrett said he wanted to avoid situations such as one that occurred in 2002, when 236 HHS employees attended an international AIDS conference in Barcelona at a cost of \$3.6 million.

But the House action seemed to catch some Bush administration officials by surprise. HHS, for example, already had trimmed travel expenses in accordance with a policy change made last year by Secretary Tommy G. Thompson and is uncertain about the need for further travel limitations.

As a result of Mr. Thompson's change, only 60 HHS scientists attended the World Health Organization's 15th International AIDS Conference, held in Bangkok in July.

Asked about the Garrett amendment's effect on the HHS, department spokesman William Pierce said, "If Congress wants to take action, that's its right. ... But we already have a policy in place that makes sure money is spent in the most effective and efficient manner, and we don't know if this [amendment] will survive" Senate action.

John Scofield, spokesman for the House Appropriations Committee, said the amendments would be "bad policy, since there are no security exclusions."

"We're very sympathetic to concerns about agencies abusing travel ... but to do a blanket prohibition [on conference attendance] is not the best approach," he said.

If the spending measures with conference ceiling caps become law, they would affect attendance at any foreign conference held in the 12-month period beginning Oct. 1.

However, because the two bills would cover spending only in the next fiscal year, they would not affect federal attendance at the next international AIDS conference scheduled for summer 2006 in Canada.