

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
February 27, 2013

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

¹Shakhashiri, 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.

Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12) – Biography

Rush Holt, 64, is a resident of Hopewell Township, N.J. Born in West Virginia, he inherited his interest in politics from his parents. His father was the youngest person ever elected to the U.S. Senate, at age 29. His mother served as Secretary of State of West Virginia and was the first woman to hold that position.

Rep. Holt earned his B.A. in physics from Carleton College in Minnesota and completed his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, also in physics, at New York University. He has held positions as a teacher, Congressional Science Fellow, and arms control expert at the U.S. State Department, where he monitored the nuclear programs of countries such as Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and the former Soviet Union. From 1989 until he launched his 1998 congressional campaign, Holt was Assistant Director of the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, the largest research facility of Princeton University and the largest center for research in alternative energy in New Jersey. He has conducted extensive research on alternative energy and has his own patent for a solar energy device. Holt was also a five-time winner of the game show “Jeopardy!” In February 2011, Holt beat “Watson,” IBM’s computer system, in a simulated round of “Jeopardy!” at an event to promote innovation.

Rep. Holt has represented Central New Jersey in Congress since 1999. An active Member of Congress and a strong voice for his constituents, Rep. Holt serves on the Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Committee on Natural Resources, where he serves as the Ranking Member on the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, helping to develop a long-term strategy to decrease our nation’s dependence on fossil fuels and protect our environment for future generations. From 2007 to 2010, Holt was the Chairman of the Select Intelligence Oversight Panel. Created at the start of the 110th Congress in January 2007, the Panel worked to strengthen oversight of the intelligence community by ensuring that policymakers receive accurate assessments, civil liberties are safeguarded, and the intelligence community is protecting Americans.

Holt was honored to serve on the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century chaired by former Senator and astronaut John Glenn. He is co-chair of the Research and Development Caucus, and sits on Congressional caucuses concerning Children’s Environmental Health, Renewable Energy, Sustainable Development, Alzheimer’s, Diabetes, Biomedical Research, Internet, Community College, Farmland Protection, Human Rights, and a Women’s Right to Choose. Rep. Holt is also a member of the New Democrat Coalition and a member and Vice Chair of the Sustainable Energy and Environment Coalition. Additionally, Holt is a member of the House Democracy Partnership, which is comprised of 20 Members who help promote and support the development of democratic governments around the world.

Rep. Holt is married to Margaret Lancefield, a physician and medical director of the outpatient charity clinic at the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro. They have three grown children, Michael, Dejan and Rachel, and seven grandchildren, Niala, Noah, Boaz, Varun, Rohan, Cecile, and Joshua.