

32208

DECISION



**THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548**

FILE: B-215287

DATE: September 12, 1985

MATTER OF: John V. Lovell - Reclaim Vouchers -
Meal Expenses

DIGEST:

On a reclaim voucher, an employee requested reimbursement for nine meals prepared at his lodging which had been listed as no charge items on his original voucher. Where the inconsistent items are due to a lack of understanding of the standards governing reimbursement, rather than fraud or dishonesty, and there is no other basis for questioning the accuracy or validity of the reclaim items, those items may be paid.

An employee claims reimbursement for nine meals on a reclaim voucher which had been listed as "no charge" items on his original voucher. Under the circumstances of this case, and absent any other evidence of irregularities, we find that that the amounts claimed may be paid.

FACTS

This is a request for a decision from Jutta E. Partyka, Authorized Certifying Officer, Office of Surface Mining, United States Department of the Interior, concerning the claim of John V. Lovell. Mr. Lovell left his permanent duty station in Denver, Colorado, and arrived in Washington, D.C., for temporary duty on Thursday, September 1, 1983. He left Washington, D.C., the following Tuesday, September 6, 1983, for another temporary duty assignment in the State of Washington. Monday, September 5, was a holiday. On his travel vouchers he describes himself as "In Travel Status" on September 2-6, 1983. His original voucher lists claims for meals as follows:

	<u>Breakfast</u>	<u>Lunch</u>	<u>Dinner</u>	<u>Total Meals</u>
Friday, Sept. 2	\$3.75	\$5.50	N/C	\$ 9.25
Saturday, Sept. 3	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C
Sunday, Sept. 4	N/C	N/C	\$12.50	\$12.50
Monday, Sept. 5 (Holiday)	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C

033149

Mr. Lovell claimed no lodging expenses and apparently stayed with his family.

Since September 3-5 were not scheduled workdays and Mr. Lovell left the Washington, D.C., area the morning of September 6, the agency requested Mr. Lovell to clarify whether he was on official business on Sunday, September 4. Mr. Lovell said he was in travel status and did not intend to claim the holiday weekend as official business. Therefore, the agency disallowed the \$12.50 claimed for dinner on Sunday, September 4.

When Mr. Lovell was notified of the disallowance and inquired about it, he was advised he could submit a reclaim voucher. His reclaim voucher lists the following amounts:

	<u>Breakfast</u>	<u>Lunch</u>	<u>Dinner</u>	<u>Total Meals</u>
Fri. Sept. 2	\$3.75 ^{2/}	\$5.50 ^{2/}	\$ 4.20 ^{1/}	\$13.45 ^{1/} & ^{2/}
Sat. Sept. 3	\$1.25	\$1.55	\$ 3.85	\$ 6.65 ^{1/}
Sun. Sept. 4	\$1.25	\$1.55	\$12.50 ^{2/}	\$15.30 ^{1/} & ^{2/}
Mon. Sept. 5	\$1.25	\$1.55	\$ 3.85	\$ 6.65 ^{1/}

Thus, on his reclaim voucher, Mr. Lovell again claimed \$12.50 for dinner on Sunday, but added claims totaling \$20.30 for nine meals prepared at his lodgings which he had previously listed as no charge items.

By way of explanation, Mr. Lovell stated that he had not originally claimed reimbursement for the cost of food prepared at his lodging because he appreciated the opportunity to be with his family. However, when agency auditors disallowed his claim for \$12.50 for Sunday dinner at a restaurant, he decided to claim all costs.

Mr. Lovell emphasizes that he worked Friday through Monday. The project he was assigned to had to be completed

^{1/} Actual cost of food prepared at lodging.

^{2/} Actual cost of food purchased at restaurant.

prior to the following week's temporary duty in the State of Washington. Therefore, he put in 20 hours of unpaid overtime for the government to complete the project on time.

DISCUSSION

We first point out that there is no suggestion of fraud in this case. Rather, the inconsistencies in the two vouchers appear to be due to a lack of knowledge regarding government reimbursement standards. B-214130, January 11, 1985, and Eric C. Nielson, B-195380, December 5, 1979. The record indicates that the agency's inquiries about the \$12.50 dinner did not make it clear that Mr. Lovell remained in the area to complete his assignment, and not solely for personal reasons. Apparently, Mr. Lovell did not understand, and/or the agency did not explain the significance of the terms "in travel status" and "official business." Annoyed at the disallowance of \$12.50, Mr. Lovell added items to the reclaim voucher which he had listed as no charge on his original voucher.

While it is unfortunate that this failure of communication occurred, we do not believe the resulting differences in the vouchers provide a basis for disallowing items which appear to be otherwise valid claims. As noted, there is no suggestion of fraud. 57 Comp. Gen. 664 (1978). The agency does not dispute Mr. Lovell's assertion that he worked over the weekend. The amounts claimed are very small, and we are aware of no other irregularities which would call into question the accuracy or validity of the items claimed on the reclaim voucher.

Accordingly, the \$12.50 for Sunday dinner in a restaurant may be paid.

With respect to the nine meals prepared at Mr. Lovell's lodgings, there are two acceptable methods for documenting such a claim. Claimants may prorate the actual cost of groceries on a per meal basis. Warren W. Tignor, B-190583, February 10, 1978, and Herman Zivetz, B-213868, July 12, 1984. In the alternative, claimants may submit a reasonable reconstruction of the actual cost of each meal. James L. Palmer, 56 Comp. Gen. 40 (1976).

In this case, the actual cost of each meal has been claimed. The amounts claimed are small, appear reasonable,

B-215287

and are well below the maximum allowable. Compare Palmer and Zivetz, supra, and Jeffrey Israel, B-209763, March 21, 1983. Accordingly, the \$20.30 claimed for these nine meals may be paid.

Milton J. Auster

Acting Comptroller General
of the United States