

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-278](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

To help fulfill DOD's and DOE's S&T missions, including mitigating emerging threats, the departments' scientists attend conferences. In May 2012, OMB directed agencies, among other things, to establish senior-level review processes for all hosted or attended conferences exceeding specific cost thresholds. DOD and DOE implemented conference policies in 2012, with subsequent updates, to comply with OMB's requirements.

GAO was mandated to review the effects of OMB's requirements on DOD's and DOE's S&T missions. Among other things, this report (1) examines S&T conference participation changes since policy implementation, and examines the extent to which DOD and DOE (2) face and have mitigated implementation challenges, and (3) have identified risks from conference participation changes and analyzed them for any potential effects. GAO reviewed conference policies, and interviewed and surveyed conference management and S&T officials from principal research labs. Survey results were not generalizable.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD and DOE (1) establish time frames for providing conference request decisions and (2) develop a plan to analyze and periodically reevaluate risks from conference participation changes. DOD partially concurred with the first recommendation, stating it will collect and analyze data to implement further solutions. GAO still believes the recommendation is valid, as discussed in the report. DOD concurred with the second recommendation and DOE concurred with both recommendations.

View [GAO-15-278](#). For more information, contact Johana Ayers at (202) 512-5741 or ayersj@gao.gov, or John Neumann at (202) 512-3841 or neumannj@gao.gov.

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DEFENSE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Further DOD and DOE Actions Needed to Provide Timely Conference Decisions and Analyze Risks from Changes in Participation

What GAO Found

Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Energy (DOE) officials cited reduced attendance at science and technology (S&T) conferences by scientists and engineers since DOD and DOE implemented their conference policies. These policies, responding to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requirements, established processes for senior-level review and approval of conference requests based on department-wide cost thresholds. Following policy implementation, DOD's Army Research Laboratory officials stated that conference attendance by personnel decreased from about 1,300 attendees in 2011 to about 100 attendees in 2013. At DOE, a Sandia National Laboratories official estimated that Sandia attendance at a key conference declined by about half from 2011 through 2013. DOD and DOE officials noted other factors that may have affected conference attendance, such as OMB's mandatory reduction in travel, and sequestration.

The length of DOD's and DOE's conference review and approval processes, which has increased since implementing their policies, poses a challenge to timely decision making about conference requests that DOD and DOE have yet to fully mitigate. Information provided by DOD and DOE officials indicates the length of their conference review and approval processes has increased from a period of weeks to as much as 9 months after implementing their policies, in part, due to the multiple levels of review required. As a result, DOD and DOE officials stated that approval decisions are often not made until close to the start of a conference, which creates a disincentive for the departments' scientists and engineers to take on active roles, such as presenting research or serving as a keynote speaker, and may lead to increased registration or travel costs. DOD and DOE have taken steps to streamline aspects of their review and approval processes, but these efforts have not always provided conference request decisions in a time frame that meets applicants' needs. In particular, DOD and DOE have not established time frames for providing decisions based on applicants' needs. Federal internal control standards state that as agencies strive to improve their processes, management must assure that information is communicated in a time frame that helps those who need it to carry out their responsibilities. Until DOD and DOE establish these time frames, scientists and engineers will continue to face uncertainty over whether they can commit to more active roles at a conference or take advantage of discounted registration fees.

DOD and DOE officials have identified and communicated risks associated with changes in conference participation, but have not analyzed these risks for any potential effects on their departments' S&T missions. Identified risks include a potential decline in the quality of scientific research, difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified scientists and engineers, and a diminished leadership role for DOD and DOE within the global S&T community. However, GAO found that DOD and DOE officials have not developed a plan to analyze the risks for any potential effects to achieving the departments' S&T missions or to periodically reevaluate these risks consistent with federal internal control standards. Without developing a plan to analyze and periodically reevaluate these risks, it will be difficult for DOD and DOE to manage any potential effects from these risks on their ability to achieve their S&T missions.