



July 2016

# FEDERAL TRAVEL

## Opportunities Exist to Improve Data and Information Sharing

Accessible Version

## Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies rely on travel to achieve a broad range of missions. GSA helps agencies develop travel policy by providing guidance to agencies, including issuing and revising the FTR. The administration and GSA have encouraged agencies to take steps to adopt cost-savings efforts and promote efficient travel spending.

House Report 112-136 included a provision for GAO to report on whether FTR revisions resulted in measurable reductions in travel costs. This report: 1) describes selected agencies' actions taken to address FTR revisions; 2) determines the extent to which FTR revisions led to cost savings; and 3) determines any cost savings achieved during fiscal years 2012 to 2015. GAO reviewed information from six selected federal agencies with the largest amount of travel spending in fiscal year 2015. GAO also reviewed how these agencies responded to GSA's FTR amendments and travel bulletins to achieve cost savings.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Administrator of GSA should work with the STOC to: 1) develop a travel data management approach that would provide GSA with more consistent travel cost data; and 2) as chair of the STOC, identify and implement promising practices to help agencies leverage travel resources and achieve cost savings.

## FEDERAL TRAVEL

### Opportunities Exist to Improve Data and Information Sharing

## What GAO Found

The Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State, and Veterans Affairs, the six federal agencies with the largest travel spending in fiscal year 2015, pursued a variety of cost-saving efforts that generally aligned with regulations and guidance issued in either Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) amendments or General Services Administration (GSA) travel bulletins from fiscal year 2011 to fiscal year 2015. GSA administers and revises the FTR—which interprets statutory and other policy requirements to ensure that official travel is conducted responsibly—and minimizes administrative costs. Although GSA does not have the authority to enforce the FTR, it issues FTR amendments and travel bulletins to help federal agencies manage their respective travel programs and achieve travel cost savings through the provisions contained in the amendments and travel bulletins. GSA FTR amendments and travel bulletins issued between fiscal years 2011 and 2015 contained a total of 27 cost-saving provisions. Agency officials at each of the six selected agencies stated that their respective agencies either had policies in place that already addressed the cost-saving provisions; developed new travel policies or issued guidance that reinforced the provisions or updated existing policies related to the provisions; or advised employees to follow the FTR without implementing an agency-specific policy.

The six agencies reported that GSA's review of the FTR to revise obsolete and outdated policies influenced their actions and resulted in cost savings. However, most of these savings could not be quantified. Only four cost-saving efforts at two agencies—the Departments of Defense and Justice—could be quantified. These agencies reported that a wide range of factors influenced their cost-saving efforts. In addition to FTR-compliance efforts, these agencies reported that administration actions on reducing travel costs, cutting waste, and promoting efficient spending influenced their approaches to managing travel costs. Agency officials also reported that broader efforts to improve operational efficiency, and efforts to responsibly use resources, also influenced their agency-specific policies and practices to promote efficient travel spending.

According to GSA and officials from the six selected agencies, data limitations existed both within the selected agencies in terms of their ability to quantify travel-related cost savings, and government-wide in terms of comparing and aggregating travel data across agencies. Without standardized reporting practices, the federal government lacks common metrics for identifying, comparing and evaluating travel spending across federal agencies. The Senior Travel Official Council (STOC) was formed in 2015 to identify efficiencies and discuss best practices related to travel cost savings. According to its charter, the STOC allows agencies to work toward more consistent reporting of travel data and share information on cost-saving efforts. Although the STOC has taken some initial action to bring agencies together, additional efforts to facilitate agencies' information sharing and identification of promising practices could further enhance these efforts to encourage and achieve travel cost-saving across the federal government.

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### Abbreviations

CPP	City Pair Program
DTMO	Defense Travel Management Office
DHS	Department of Homeland Security

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DOD	Department of Defense
DOJ	Department of Justice
EO	Executive Order
ETS2	E-Gov Travel Service 2
FAM	Foreign Affairs Manual
FTR	Federal Travel Regulation
FMPM	Financial Management Policy Manual
GSA	General Services Administration
GTAC	Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee
JTR	Joint Travel Regulations
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
State	Department of State
STOC	Senior Travel Official Council
TDY	temporary duty
TRIP	Travel Reporting Information Profile
USDA	Department of Agriculture
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs



July 21, 2016

The Honorable John Boozman  
Chairman  
The Honorable Christopher Coons  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate

The Honorable Ander Crenshaw  
Chairman  
The Honorable José Serrano  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government  
Committee on Appropriations  
House of Representatives

Federal agencies rely on travel to achieve a broad range of missions such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency responding to natural disasters, and the Department of Agriculture inspecting food quality. The administration and the General Services Administration (GSA) have encouraged agencies to take steps to adopt cost-savings efforts and promote efficient federal travel spending. The administration encouraged agencies to develop “strategic alternatives to government travel, including local or technological alternatives,” and identify ways to reduce costs and ensure there are appropriate controls in place.<sup>1</sup> GSA also helps agencies manage their respective travel programs and achieve travel-related cost

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<sup>1</sup>Executive Order No. 13589, “*Promoting Efficient Spending*” (Nov. 9, 2011), 76 Fed. Reg. 70,863 (Nov. 15, 2011) requires agencies to reduce their combined costs in a variety of administrative categories (including travel) by at least 20 percent in fiscal year 2013 from fiscal year 2010 levels, and to designate a senior travel official to be responsible for developing and implementing policies and controls to ensure efficient spending on travel and conference-related activities. OMB, *Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations*, Memorandum, M-12-12 (May 11, 2012) requires agencies to spend “at least 30 percent less on covered travel expenses” in fiscal year 2013 than in fiscal year 2010 and maintain the reduced level of spending each year through fiscal year 2016. This memorandum described “practical steps agencies can take to improve operations, increase efficiency, and cut unnecessary spending,” OMB Memorandum, *Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations*, at 1.

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savings by issuing and revising the Federal Travel Regulation (FTR).<sup>2</sup> In response to potential cost-saving areas identified by the administration and GSA regulations and guidance, some agencies have created or modified agency-specific internal travel policies and processes to reduce travel-related costs while accomplishing their missions.

In July 2011, in House Report 112-136 accompanying the 2012 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, the Committee on Appropriations directed GSA to create the appropriate interdisciplinary and interagency teams to review and revise federal travel regulations, and report on these efforts. In the same report, Congress included a provision for us to report on whether the FTR revisions resulted “in measurable reductions in cost.”<sup>3</sup> This report: 1) describes agencies’ actions taken to address FTR revisions; 2) determines the extent to which FTR revisions led to cost savings; and 3) determines any cost savings achieved during fiscal years 2012 to 2015.

To address these objectives, we obtained travel budget data from the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) MAX database that identified the six federal agencies with the largest travel spending in fiscal year 2015.<sup>4</sup> These are the Departments of: 1) Agriculture; 2) Defense; 3) Homeland Security; 4) Justice; 5) State; and 6) Veterans Affairs (see table 1). Together, these six agencies accounted for about 84 percent of the total government-wide travel budget in fiscal year 2015. To determine the reliability of the data, the team cross-checked the MAX data against the numbers reported in the corresponding President’s Budget Appendixes. Data reported in MAX are subject to rigorous review and

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<sup>2</sup>FTR is codified at 41 C.F.R., Subtitle F, Chapters 300-304. FTR includes the travel and relocation regulations for all Title 5 (of the U.S. Code) executive agency employees, and is updated whenever final changes are published in the *Federal Register*. FTR implements statutory requirements and executive branch policies that federal entities must follow concerning government-related travel. This includes the general principle that employees traveling on official government business should exercise the same prudence as if traveling on personal business.

<sup>3</sup>H.R. Rep. No. 112-136, Tit. V, at 51 (2011).

<sup>4</sup>OMB uses the MAX Information System to collect, validate, analyze, model, collaborate with agencies on, and publish information related to its government-wide management and budgeting activities. The MAX Information System is used to support OMB’s federal management and budget processes.

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checks through OMB to help ensure their consistency of the data. These data were considered reliable for the purpose of this report.

**Table 1: Federal Travel Budgets for Six Selected Agencies between Fiscal Years 2012 and 2015**

(obligated \$ in millions)

Department/Agency	2012	2013	2014	2015
Agriculture	279	316	350	403
Defense	10,650	8,318	8,818	8,247
Homeland Security	1,446	1,119	1,199	1,184
Justice	468	352	367	438
State	444	409	495	421
Veterans Affairs	1,137	1,067	1,080	1,084

Source: OMB MAX data. | GAO-16-657

Note: According to Veterans Affairs officials, the agency's annual federal travel budgets include beneficiary travel as authorized under 38 U.S.C. 111 to help veterans and other persons obtain care and services from the Veterans Health Administration.

In addition to the OMB Max travel data, we also requested the Travel Reporting Information Profile (TRIP) reports for fiscal years 2012 through 2015 from the six selected agencies. Federal agencies that spend more than \$5 million annually for all travel (domestic and international) must prepare and submit a TRIP report to GSA that consists of travel costs incurred by the agencies. The report must contain summary-level data on travel costs related to transportation, lodging, and other miscellaneous travel-related costs. We used these data to understand the consistency of agency reporting and considered them reliable for the purposes of this report.

We reviewed the FTR travel amendments and GSA travel bulletins issued from fiscal years 2011 to 2015 to identify cost-saving provisions. We identified three relevant FTR amendments and four GSA travel bulletins

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that contained a total of 27 cost-saving provisions (see appendix I).<sup>5</sup> We asked officials at the six selected agencies to complete and respond to a data collection instrument that listed the GSA cost-saving provisions, asked how their respective agencies responded to these, and asked agencies the extent to which the 27 cost-saving provisions resulted in cost savings. Because agencies were generally unable to quantify cost savings, we also interviewed officials at the selected agencies to identify whether any of the GSA cost-saving provisions resulted in efforts to reduce travel costs, and whether or not cost savings related to these efforts were quantifiable.

For the purpose of this report, we defined travel cost savings as reductions in costs associated with individual travel-related transactions. Reduction in travel-related transactions might not result in reduced total travel spending at an agency. Agency officials may allocate these savings to support other travel needs. The use of these terms is consistent with the principles of Executive Order (EO) 13589, “*Promoting Efficient Spending*” (Nov. 9, 2011), and OMB Memorandum M-12-12, *Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations* (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2012).

We conducted this performance audit from June 2015 to July 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>5</sup>The relevant provisions which amended the FTR are: (1) *Lodging Reimbursement*, 76 Fed. Reg. 63,844 (Oct. 14, 2011) (*codified at* 41 C.F.R. § 301-11); (2) *Removal of Conference Lodging Allowance Provisions*, 78 Fed. Reg. 65,210 (Oct. 31, 2013) (*codified at* 41 C.F.R. §§ 301-11 and 301-74); and, (3) *Enhancement of Privately Owned Vehicle and Rental Vehicle Policy*, 80 Fed. Reg. 27,259 (May 13, 2015) (*codified at* 41 C.F.R. §§ 300-3, 301-10, and 301-70). The relevant GSA travel bulletins are: (1) GSA Bulletin FTR 13-03, *Promoting Efficient Travel Spending*, (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 2012); (2) GSA Bulletin FTR 13-07, *Emphasizing Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) Opportunities for Achieving Reduced Travel Costs through Use of City Pair Program (CPP) Contract and Non-Contract Airfares*, (Washington, D.C.: June 4, 2013); (3) GSA Bulletin FTR 14-05, *Rental Car (Passenger Vehicle) Requirements*, (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 16, 2014); and, (4) GSA Bulletin FTR 14-08, *Designation of Agency Senior Travel Officials*, (Washington, D.C.: May 13, 2014).

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## Background

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### FTR Amendments and GSA Travel Bulletins

To help federal agencies manage their respective travel programs and achieve travel cost savings, GSA issues and revises the FTR. According to the FTR website, GSA promulgates the FTR to: (1) interpret statutory and other policy requirements in a manner that balances the need to ensure that official travel is conducted responsibly with the need to minimize administrative costs, and (2) clearly communicate the resulting requirements to federal agencies and employees.<sup>6</sup> Formal changes to the FTR are identified as amendments and published in the *Federal Register* in accordance with the rulemaking provision of the Administrative Procedure Act.<sup>7</sup> GSA officials stated that, while the agency develops and promulgates the rules and amendments that comprise the FTR, it does not have enforcement authority for agencies' compliance with FTR requirements. In addition to FTR amendments, GSA also issues travel bulletins (nonbinding guidance) that GSA officials said can typically be issued within a shorter timeframe than final rules published in the *Federal Register*. According to GSA officials, the travel bulletins are generally issued to remind agencies of existing FTR requirements.

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### Executive Order 13589

Administration actions have encouraged agencies to develop mechanisms by which federal agencies could reduce travel. For example, EO 13589, "*Promoting Efficient Spending*" called for agencies and their components to: 1) to devise strategic alternatives to government travel, including local or technological alternatives, such as teleconferencing and video conferencing; 2) conduct business and host or sponsor conferences in a space controlled by the federal government, wherever practicable and cost effective; and 3) designate a senior official responsible for developing and implementing policies and controls to ensure efficient spending on travel- and conference-related activities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.gsa.gov/federaltravelregulation>, last accessed on July 11, 2016.

<sup>7</sup>5 U.S.C. § 553.

<sup>8</sup>Exec. Ord. No. 13589, "*Promoting Efficient Spending*" (Nov. 9, 2011), 76 Fed. Reg. 70,863 (November 15, 2011).

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## OMB Memorandum 12-12

Following the issuance of EO 13589, OMB issued a supporting memorandum on *Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations*.<sup>9</sup> In order to support the cost saving goals of the Executive Order, the memorandum explained the role that travel plays in supporting agency missions and supporting local economies. At the same time, the memorandum required that each agency reduce its spending on travel costs, and provided that specific travel policies be established or clarified to manage travel budgets more efficiently and to reduce reliance on travel. The reductions were time limited through fiscal year 2016, but the memorandum explained that the intent was, among other things, to make the reductions in travel budgets sustainable.

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## The Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee

In 2012, GSA formed the Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee (GTAC) to review existing travel policies, processes, and procedures. GSA formed GTAC to: 1) review existing travel policies, processes, and procedures; 2) ensure that the policies and procedures are accountable and transparent; and 3) help federal agencies achieve their missions effectively and efficiently at the lowest logical travel cost.<sup>10</sup> In 2015, GTAC issued a report that provided advice and recommendations to GSA to, among other things, incorporate industry best practices.<sup>11</sup> In 2015, GSA also established the Senior Travel Official Council to assist in the administration's efforts to promote efficient spending.<sup>12</sup>

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## Travel Reporting Information Profile

Data used by the agencies to prepare Travel Reporting Information Profile (TRIP) reports for GSA are maintained within each agency's travel system, which is part of the E-Gov Travel Service 2 (ETS2). The TRIP report requires agencies to provide aggregate travel cost data (transportation, lodging, and meals and incidentals) for five travel categories:

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<sup>9</sup>OMB, *Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations*, Memorandum, M-12-12 (May 11, 2012).

<sup>10</sup>General Services Administration (GSA), Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee (GTAC) Charter, at 1(Dec. 3, 2012, filed on Jan. 10, 2013).

<sup>11</sup>GSA, *Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee (GTAC) Final Report*, (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 4, 2015).

<sup>12</sup>GSA, GTAC, Charter, at 1.

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- **employee emergency**—travel related to an unexpected occurrence/event or injury/illness that affects the employee personally and/or directly that requires immediate action/attention;
  - **mission (operational)**—travel to a particular site to perform operational or managerial activities;
  - **special agency mission**—travel to carry out a special agency mission and/or perform a task outside the agency’s normal course of day-to-day business activities that is unique or distinctive. These special missions are defined by the head of agency and are normally not programmed in the agency annual funding authorization;
  - **nontraining conference**—travel performed in connection with a prearranged meeting, retreat, convention, seminar, or symposium for consultation or exchange of information or discussion; and,
  - **training**—travel in conjunction with educational activities to become proficient or qualified in one or more areas of responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

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## E-Gov Travel Service 2

GSA encourages federal agencies to use ETS2 reporting capabilities as a means to track, monitor, and report on costs related to travel spending. ETS2 is a comprehensive travel services program that brings a reporting capability to the agencies’ travel programs. In addition, GSA created ETS2 with the expectation that the services available under ETS2 would 1) enable federal agencies to further consolidate travel services, platforms, and channels; 2) improve the leverage of government travel spending; 3) increase transparency for improved accountability; and 4) reduce waste. According to GSA officials, ETS2 provides the travel reporting capability that aligns with and supports OMB’s Memorandum M-12-12. ETS2 can generate reports related to an agency’s travel costs and other travel-related activities. For example, through ETS2 an agency can generate operational reports to monitor day-to-day travel services, travel management, and regulatory reports that can be used to foster and encourage an agency’s managers to make informed decisions. By 2013, GSA awarded the development of ETS2 to two contractors that allowed

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<sup>13</sup>Federal agencies that spend more than \$5 million annually for all travel (domestic and international) must prepare and submit a TRIP report to GSA that consists of travel costs incurred by the agencies. The report must contain summary-level data on travel costs related to transportation, lodging, and other miscellaneous travel-related costs.

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agencies to design a travel data cost system that best meets their respective needs.

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## Cost-Saving Efforts at Selected Agencies Generally Aligned with Regulations and Guidance

### Selected Agencies Already Had Travel Policies in Place Prior to the Issuance of Regulations or Guidance

Officials at each of the six selected agencies stated that, while their respective agencies pursued a wide range of cost-saving efforts to address the GSA cost-saving provisions, all of them had policies in place that addressed these provisions prior to GSA issuance of either an amendment or travel bulletin. Some of the agencies' cost-saving efforts involved these agencies updating internal policy statements, issuing internal guidance, configuring their ETS2 to require justifications for making a policy exception, and providing in-person and web-based trainings. For example, Department of Defense (DOD) officials stated that for half of the travel bulletin provisions (10 of 20) DOD's related actions had been in effect since at least 1998. In one instance, DOD included a provision in the December 1998 Joint Travel Regulations (JTR) that limited reimbursement of employees buying rental car insurance. This included the collision damage waiver adjustment and theft protection. This aligned with the 2014 GSA Bulletin FTR 14-05's guidance recommending that travelers decline additional insurance when renting vehicles.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) travel system contained a restriction prompting travelers to provide a justification for not using a CPP fare, as well as confirmation that the alternative air fare is greater than the "least logical airfare plus 75.00 dollars." In addition, USDA's internal travel policies state that each agency and staff office is expected to use the method of travel most advantageous to the government, including lower-cost airfares.

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<sup>14</sup>GSA Bulletin FTR 14-05, *Rental Car (Passenger Vehicle) Requirements*, (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 16, 2014).

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## Selected Agencies Developed New Policies or Guidance to Reinforce or Update Existing Internal Travel Policies

According to officials at the six selected agencies, they were already taking action to address the issues introduced by FTR amendments and GSA travel bulletins. However, because the bulletins served to reinforce existing policy, these actions resulted in these agencies' officials taking further actions—either developing new travel policy or issuing a memorandum to staff reminding them of existing agency travel policy—to highlight the policy. For example, according to officials at the Department of State (State), while the agency had codified the requirement for using contract air carriers in its own Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) at least as early as 2005, the more recent GSA travel bulletin on contract and noncontract airfares influenced State to reinforce the policy by issuing departmental notices and cables to all diplomatic and consular posts outlining the parameters for the use of commercial airfares.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, DOD officials said that the agency addressed two cost-saving provisions within the same GSA travel bulletin by taking a new action to augment an existing policy. One provision addressed the issue of reviewing internal policies to ensure that the agency's use of CPP contract and non-contract air carriers resulted in overall cost savings. The other provision addressed agencies' management of their internal procedures to assess risk associated with using non-contract fares, which officials said they addressed through the same cost-saving effort. DOD officials stated that they had already taken a related action prior to the issuance of the bulletin. However, the travel bulletin resulted in DOD updating the JTR by strengthening the language related to using restricted fares and requiring the use of a Decision Support Tool to assist in determining if a restricted fare may be advantageous to the government.<sup>16</sup>

In other cases, FTR amendments or GSA travel bulletins prompted the six agencies to take new actions. In these instances, these agencies took action as a direct result of the recently-issued GSA provisions for which they had not previously pursued a related cost-saving effort. This usually

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<sup>15</sup>GSA Bulletin FTR 13-07, *Emphasizing Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) Opportunities for Achieving Reduced Travel Costs through Use of City Pair Program (CPP) Contract and Non-Contract Airfares*, (Washington, D.C.: June 4, 2013).

<sup>16</sup>DOD's Decision Support Tool provides a checklist of questions for agency officials to answer, including; (1) whether the departure date is more than 7 days from the ticket purchase; (2) whether the travel is not subject to date, time, or destination change; and (3) whether the costs of the restricted airfare is less than the least expensive unrestricted airfare by \$150 or more.

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happened through the development of a new agency-specific travel policy or the issuance of a memorandum to staff reminding them of existing agency travel policy. For example, one FTR amendment addressed the use of rental cars that resulted in the Department of Justice (DOJ) issuing a memorandum advising travelers that pre-paid fueling options for rental vehicles are not authorized according to the amendment. This was a cost-saving effort that the agency had not pursued prior to the amendment.

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### Selected Agencies Advised and Reminded Employees to Continue Following the FTR in a Variety of Additional Ways

Officials at five of the six selected agencies described a few cases where their respective agencies took no specific policy action, but either: 1) advised employees to follow the FTR; 2) asked individual components to create unique policies that ensured FTR compliance; or 3) provided approving officials with the discretion to oversee employees' compliance with the FTR as appropriate, and determine whether or how to adopt promising practices from the GSA travel bulletins. For example, according to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials, employees were reminded to follow the FTR. However, if any of the agency's components needed to clarify or address parts of the FTR not specifically covered by the agency's Financial Management Policy Manual (FMPM), DHS empowered them to do so. For example, FMPM does not have a specific policy prohibiting reimbursement for purchasing pre-paid fueling options for rental cars, a GSA requirement. However, DHS officials stated that employees were asked to "exercise the same care in incurring expenses that a prudent person would exercise if using his or her personal funds while on personal business." According to officials, components and travelers were still responsible for adjusting their travel actions to remain compliant with the FTR even when DHS policy could not be promptly updated. According to DHS officials, "as questions are raised by the travelers, the policy staff at each component provides the guidance necessary to maintain FTR compliance."

In another example, officials at State refrained from taking a policy action to address two provisions in GSA Bulletin FTR 13-03 because the department wanted to provide approving officials with some discretion over travel decisions on individual trips and vouchers, such as determining if a rental car is a better option than public transportation for travelers, and whether travelers should be required to share rental cars and taxis while on official travel in groups and when public transportation

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is not a better option.<sup>17</sup> The cost of transportation is among many factors approving officials weigh when deciding. Given a wide diversity of factors across global locations in safe, secure, and available local transportation options, State officials told us that at that time they did not dictate a centralized policy on employee sharing of rental cars and taxis in order to leave this discretion to the traveler’s approving official. Use of public transportation over rental car usage, remains in the traveler’s approving official’s discretion. State subsequently updated their FAM on Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 with specific provisions for rental cars on official travel. They said this allows approving officials the discretion to apply the prudent traveler rule, which in application “should clearly require employees to share rental cars while on official travel in groups.”<sup>18</sup>

We also found that the selected agencies initiated travel cost-saving efforts that were in addition to provisions recommended by GSA. For example, a September 2015 Defense Travel Management Office (DTMO) report—*DOD Travel Reform*—said that DTMO tracked numerous cost-saving travel reform initiatives for policy simplification that it pursued outside of the actions taken related to GSA’s bulletins and FTR amendments.<sup>19</sup> These initiatives include: 1) standardization of reimbursement rates for privately-owned vehicles into a single rate; 2) creation of a standard travel rate to ensure that per diem is very limited for trips in which it takes a day to travel to a temporary duty (TDY) travel location; and 3) expansion of the definition of incidental expenses to include miscellaneous expenses.

In another example, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) officials stated that in addition to the web-based training material providing for reduced per diem for long-term TDY, VA had additional requirements that were beyond the scope of GSA’s bulletins and FTR amendments and that targeted additional cost savings. These requirements stated that travelers must stay in weekly or monthly rentals during extended assignments whenever possible and reduce their meals, incidentals, and expenses

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<sup>17</sup>GSA Bulletin FTR 13-03, *Promoting Efficient Travel Spending*, (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 2012).

<sup>18</sup>GSA Bulletin FTR 13-03.

<sup>19</sup>Department of Defense, Defense Travel Management Office (DTMO), *DoD Travel Reform*, (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2015).

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when the traveler is able to obtain lodging or meals at lower costs.

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## The Senior Travel Official Council Encouraged Cost-Saving Efforts among the Agencies, but More Information Sharing Needed

The Senior Travel Official Council (STOC) brings travel officials from all federal agencies together to share information and best practices to further cost-saving efforts.<sup>20</sup> GSA established the STOC in 2015 to identify consistencies and best practices in the areas of travel policy, programs, and procurement.<sup>21</sup> According to GSA officials, STOC is designed to help agencies make better use of their travel cost data to make informed decisions about internal policymaking and replicate actions taken by other agencies that implemented successful cost-saving policies and practices.

According to STOC meeting minutes, the council has taken some steps toward information-sharing efforts that could benefit all federal agencies. For example, in 2015, the council initiated a pilot program involving eight agencies to share promising practices in five areas: online booking, airfare savings, hotel reservations, car rentals, and SmartPay usage.<sup>22</sup> Based on the pilot, STOC will come up with policies and processes that other agencies can choose and implement. In a December 2015 STOC meeting, officials from DOJ and the National Science Foundation provided information on actions they took prior to the pilot, and how those actions resulted in cost savings at their agencies. DOJ noted that their cost savings programs had top-down agency support and agency officials

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<sup>20</sup>GSA bulletin FTR 14-08 strongly encouraged the designation of a Senior Travel Official and stated that: "in addition to the directives in Section 3(a) of EO 13589, the senior travel official: "works to direct and manage agency-wide travel programs ... to obtain economy and efficiency." GSA Bulletin FTR 14-08, at § 4(c). The bulletin also states that: "no later than 90 days from issuance of this bulletin, the GSA Travel Policy and Program Offices will implement quarterly meetings of STOs." GSA Bulletin FTR 14-08, at § 5.

<sup>21</sup>According to its charter, three of STOC's objectives are to: 1) leverage best practices to inform government-wide travel solutions; 2) maximize visibility into government-wide travel spending; and 3) implement government-wide policies that simplify, standardize, and or reduce the cost of travel. STOC set up two primary working groups to discuss government-wide travel data analytics and best practices in relocation. GSA, GTAC Charter, at 1.

<sup>22</sup>Established in 1998, the GSA SmartPay Program is a government charge card and commercial payment solutions program that provides services to more than 350 federal agencies, organizations, and Native American tribal governments. GSA SmartPay payment solutions enable authorized government employees to make purchases on behalf of the federal government in support of their agency/organization's mission.

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implemented a policy change that required online booking and the lowest logical airfare. By implementing this policy, DOJ officials claimed a savings of more than \$9.2 million when using lowest logical airfare (non-refundable tickets) and an online booking rate of 68 percent in fiscal year 2015. According to GSA officials, the STOC plans to encourage agencies to pursue these policies beyond the pilot program.

However, according to GSA officials and STOC meeting minutes, STOC members have yet to take full advantage of the STOC to network and learn about other agency-initiated policies that could lead to potential cost savings. According to GSA officials, the STOC members had not yet formally shared much information about other promising practices for tracking and monitoring savings that could be replicated to benefit other federal agencies. However, these officials said that the STOC is still in the early stages, and opportunities for agencies to share information have been limited. Such practices could help agencies to develop and implement cost-saving efforts, and quantify those efforts when possible. Without using the STOC meetings to engage in information sharing about these practices, agencies have a limited ability to learn from and apply other agencies' methods for using E-Gov Travel Service 2 (ETS2) data reports to track and monitor the impact and effectiveness of their policies on travel spending reductions.

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## Most Efforts to Reduce Agency Travel-Related Spending Could Not Be Quantified

Only four cost-saving efforts at two of the selected agencies—DOJ and DOD—could be quantified. DOJ officials were able to quantify their estimated cost savings for implementing three cost-saving measures: 1) a savings of more than \$15 million due to the use of non-contract, non-refundable fares from fiscal year 2015 through the first quarter of fiscal year 2016, 2) an increase in the use of video conferencing that saved an estimated \$16.3 million during fiscal year 2010, and 3) a requirement for the use of online booking for travel reservations whenever possible that saved nearly \$3.4 million in transaction fee savings for fiscal year 2015. DOD officials also reported quantifiable cost-savings related to a GSA provision—which promoted implementing a per diem reduction for travel over 30 days<sup>23</sup> that DOD adopted by mandating a per diem reduction to

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<sup>23</sup>GSA Bulletin FTR 13-03, *Promoting Efficient Travel Spending*, (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 2012).

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75 percent of the locality rate for TDY at a single location that extends between 31 and 180 days and 55 percent for TDY of 181 or more days—that resulted in savings of over \$56 million between November 2014 and December 2015.

Although most cost-saving efforts at the selected agencies were not quantifiable, agency officials described how cost savings were likely achieved and what data limitations existed. Officials said that attempting to quantify many of the cost savings efforts would be a very labor intensive effort, and would require documenting the cost of decisions which are not made at the individual travel voucher level. For example, at VA, a travel policy stipulated that in selecting a particular local transportation method, the agency should consider, among other things, the accessibility and availability of public transportation at the TDY location. Therefore, VA officials said they did not approve car rentals in areas where public transportation is accessible and available, such as Washington, D.C. While VA officials stated that this approach likely resulted in cost savings by having travelers avoid expensive hotels and city parking fees, they could not quantify these cost savings.

In other instances, the selected agencies could not provide evidence of quantifiable cost savings at the aggregate level because travel data were not available from certain components within their agencies. For example, many sub-agencies within DHS kept track of and reported some cost savings through the elimination of non-mission critical travel, and by maximizing the use of conference calls and web-based training and meetings. However, DHS did not track such savings at the department level and could not quantify them for us. According to DHS officials, they were unable to determine or quantify cost savings at an aggregate level for most measures because DHS components had a wide variety of ways to avoid costs that were most appropriate for their unique missions, and the agency did not have a tracking mechanism to identify costs avoided. In addition, State officials said that there may be some limitations in their ability to collect and report data since travel at State is decentralized with each office authorizing, conducting, and collecting its own travel data.

Generally, it was not possible for most of the selected agencies to associate any one description of cost savings with a specific GSA provision. Officials at the agencies we interviewed told us that a wide range of factors influenced cost-saving efforts, including, but not limited to, GSA provisions contained within FTR amendments or GSA travel bulletins. For example, in addition to responding to GSA provisions at DHS, officials credited the Secretary's initiative to cut costs and improve

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overall operational efficiency as a reason for taking action on some of the same issues later recommended by GSA. Officials also cited other government-wide factors including requirements under Executive Order 13589 and OMB Memorandum M-12-12 that influenced cost saving efforts at agencies at the same time officials responded to GSA's cost-saving provisions.

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## Travel Data System Limitations Hinder Agencies' Ability to Identify Cost Savings

According to officials at five of the six selected agencies, a number of limitations in the travel data system designed by GSA and maintained by the agencies affected their ability to identify cost savings related to implementation of cost-saving provisions in FTR amendments and GSA travel bulletins.<sup>24</sup> GSA officials stated that while most agencies have the capability via ETS2 to track, monitor, and report on cost savings, this reporting capability is not being leveraged consistently across the federal agencies to manage their travel costs. However, because agencies can customize ETS2 to fit their particular needs, these advances may still not provide for common reporting of travel information across federal agencies. Further, officials at GSA confirmed that while ETS2 offers better tracking and monitoring of travel costs compared to its predecessor, it still cannot provide for a central means of collecting and reporting data that would be reliable for the purposes of comparison across agencies.

Access to quality travel data is essential to performing key travel management tasks. The 2015 Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee (GTAC) final report stated that access to quality data requires maintaining data from multiple sources in an integrated framework whether a system, database, or data management tool that would allow federal agencies to compile and maintain enterprise-level travel data sufficient to support business decisions, respond to government-wide data calls, leverage sourcing strategies, and comply with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993.<sup>25</sup> However, GTAC found that the

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<sup>24</sup>DOD does not use a GSA's ETS2 travel system. Instead, DOD uses their own systems: primarily the Defense Travel System, as well as the Reserve Travel System and the Integrated Automated Travel System.

<sup>25</sup>GSA, GTAC, *Final Report*, at 22 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 4, 2015) *citing* the Government Performance and Results Act, Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993).

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federal government still had not started maintaining data from multiple sources in a single, centralized, and integrated framework, whether a system, database, or data management tool.<sup>26</sup> The report's findings supported the GSA officials' statements. According to GSA officials, there is a need for more standardization in travel management reports to give GSA the ability to compare travel cost data between agencies that use either of the two ETS2 vendors, and report government-wide trends. Agencies' abilities to customize their reporting options without also meeting standard reporting requirements hinder GSA's ability to establish a common metric for tracking and monitoring federal travel spending. Agencies are also unable to fully assess the travel costs incurred by their staff. Thus, they are unable to fully identify areas for potential cost savings.

ETS2 allows agencies the option to select between two vendors who can assist them with the tracking and monitoring of travel cost data. Agencies can customize and configure their travel data systems to meet their travel needs in alignment with their policies and business needs. According to GSA officials, because agencies can customize and configure their travel data systems, and because of the lack of government-wide standards on cost savings metrics, it is difficult for GSA to facilitate peer-to-peer comparisons across the federal agencies. For example, officials said that while both ETS2 vendors have a standard report to help agencies determine their hotel attachment rates within the system, one vendor's report collects information on hotels booked within the data travel system, and the other vendor's report collects information on hotels booked outside of the data travel system. As a result, it is difficult for agencies and GSA to determine if travelers at all agencies are taking advantage of the reduced rates available when booking their lodging along with transportation.

Additionally, one of the goals of ETS2 is to help agencies achieve greater data transparency. The required TRIP reports provide travel spending

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<sup>26</sup>The purpose of GTAC was to review existing travel policies, processes, and procedures to ensure that they are accountable and transparent, beginning with the per diem methodology to aid in meeting agency missions in effectively and efficiently at the lowest logical travel cost. Through the review process, GTAC addressed current industry and federal travel trends and provided advice and recommendations for improvements to increase travel efficiency and effectiveness, reduce costs, promote sustainability, and incorporate industry best practices.

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information that was previously not tracked in ETS. This includes breaking out the travel and lodging costs into the five different categories of federal travel.<sup>27</sup> Because of a standardized template used to generate the TRIP reports and the increased capacity of ETS2, agencies are now able to report travel spending in more consistent formats. While this indicates the potential for a greater level of tracking and monitoring of travel spending by agencies, GSA officials believe that this may not be achieved unless agencies adopt common reporting practices.

According to GSA officials, in late 2015, they began to plan a shared services model to help agencies better manage their travel programs. This model would allow agencies to share a wide range of travel services with each other to reduce both administrative costs and burden to the government, and enable data-driven decision making. According to GSA officials, based on the draft business plan the shared services model would be able offer government-wide data collection, benchmarking, and reporting standards that agency managers can access and use to inform decisions. According to officials, under the shared services model, while the agencies would still be the decision makers regarding agency-specific travel policies, GSA would be able to advise them on which system configuration would allow the agencies to obtain the lowest travel costs relative to mission objectives.

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## Conclusions

The six selected agencies that accounted for more than three-quarters of federal travel dollars (Agriculture, Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State, and Veterans Affairs) did pursue a variety of efforts aimed at reducing travel costs that generally aligned with GSA's amendments to the FTR and travel bulletins. However, these agencies generally lacked data to track these efforts. GSA's efforts to track and monitor travel costs across federal agencies is similarly limited by a lack of standardized data as reported by individual agencies. More standardized data reporting could help GSA advise agencies on how to limit travel costs while still achieving their agencies' missions.

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<sup>27</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 5707 (c) requires GSA to periodically, but at least every 2 years, submit to OMB "an analysis of estimated total agency payments for such items as travel and transportation of people, average costs and duration of trips, and purposes of official travel; and of estimated total agency payments for employee relocation."

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GSA created the STOC to identify efficiencies and discuss practices for achieving travel cost savings. However, STOC members have not yet taken full advantage of this opportunity. As the STOC moves forward, opportunities exist to help agencies share information. Additional attention to these issues by STOC can help agencies develop, implement, and share their travel cost-saving efforts. Such additional attention to these issues could in turn help STOC promote the more efficient use of travel funds across the federal government without imposing additional requirements on agencies.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

The Administrator of General Services, in consultation with the STOC, should develop a travel data management approach, including common reporting formats that would provide GSA with more consistent travel cost data allowing GSA to compare travel costs across federal agencies. GSA could also include in this data management approach the planned implementation of the shared services model that would allow agencies to share a wide range of travel services with each other. This process could reduce both administrative costs and burden to the government and enable data-driven decision making.

The Administrator of GSA, as chair of the STOC, should work with the STOC to identify promising opportunities and implement leading practices to help agencies leverage their travel resources and implement travel cost-saving efforts.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Administrator of the GSA and the Secretaries of Agriculture, Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State, and Veteran Affairs for review and comment. GSA agreed with both recommendations as discussed below. The Departments of Defense, Justice, State, and Veterans Affairs provided technical comments which we incorporated as appropriate. The Departments of Agriculture and Homeland Security had no comments to our report.

In written comments received on June 30, 2016, GSA staff agreed with the two recommendations in this report and agreed to take the following actions to address them. In response to the first recommendation, GSA officials stated that they will conduct a test program to determine the opportunities and barriers of creating a reliable standardized data repository containing government-wide travel spending data. To address the second recommendation, GSA officials agreed to establish an STOC working group to implement a process of documenting promising travel

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management and cost-saving practices, which could be used by Senior Travel Officials at their respective agencies.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, and the aforementioned agencies. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6806 or [sagerm@gao.gov](mailto:sagerm@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.



Michelle Sager  
Director, Strategic Issues

# Appendix I: Travel Cost-Saving Provisions Contained in Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) Amendments and General Services Administration (GSA) Travel Bulletins Issued between Fiscal Years 2011 and 2015

FTR Amendments	Description
<b>Lodging Reimbursement</b>	<p>76 Fed. Reg. 63844, (Oct. 14, 2011) (codified at 41 C.F.R. § 301-11)</p> <p>Agency must not reimburse real estate expenses or the lodging portion of per diem for the purchase or sale of a personal residence or recreational vehicle at the temporary duty (TDY) travel location.</p> <p>Agency must not reimburse the lodging portion of per diem to travelers who lodge at their personal residences while on TDY.</p>
<b>Removal of Conference Lodging Allowance Provisions</b>	<p>78 Fed. Reg. 65210, (Oct. 31, 2013) (codified at 41 C.F.R. §§ 301-11 and 301-70)</p> <p>Agency must no longer use the conference lodging allowance reimbursement option for employees on TDY. This refers to the allowance for travelers to exceed the lodging rate by up to 25 percent.</p> <p>If per diem lodging rates are unavailable at conference location, travelers should construct a cost comparison to decide whether to find lodging within per diem that is away from the conference location or reimburse actual expenses for lodging at the conference location that does not have a per diem rate.</p>
<b>Enhancement of Privately Owned Vehicle and Rental Vehicle Policy</b>	<p>80 Fed. Reg. 27259, (May 13, 2015) (codified at 41 C.F.R. §§ 300-3, 301-10 and 301-70)</p> <p>Travelers must use the least expensive compact car available unless an exception is approved.</p> <p>Travelers will not be reimbursed for purchasing pre-paid fuel for rental cars. Travelers should refuel prior to returning the vehicle to the rental car company.</p> <p>Travelers will not be reimbursed for fees associated with rental car loyalty points or transfer of points charged by car companies.</p>
GSA Travel Bulletin	Description
<b>Promoting Efficient Travel Spending</b>	<p>FTR 13-03, Dec. 21, 2012</p> <p>Agency should justify that employee travel is necessary to accomplish the mission.</p> <p>Agency should consider technological alternatives to travel.</p> <p>Agency should consider all viable lowest-cost transportation options, such as selecting a non-contract airfare.</p> <p>Agency should have controls in place to collect all refunds for unused or partially used airline tickets.</p> <p>Agency should encourage employees to use public transportation as the first option for local transportation when on TDY.</p> <p>Agency should increase employee sharing of rental cars and taxis.</p> <p>Agency should encourage employees to evaluate all lodging options that are within per diem.</p> <p>Agency should evaluate reduced per diem for TDY assignments that last more than 30 days and a Temporary Change of Station for TDY assignments that last more than 180 days.</p>
<b>Emphasizing FTR</b>	<p>FTR 13-07, June 4, 2013.</p>

**Appendix I: Travel Cost-Saving Provisions  
Contained in Federal Travel Regulation (FTR)  
Amendments and General Services  
Administration (GSA) Travel Bulletins Issued  
between Fiscal Years 2011 and 2015**

<b>GSA Travel Bulletin</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b><i>Opportunities for Achieving Reduced Travel Costs through Use of City Pair Program (CPP) Contract and Non-Contract Airfares</i></b>	Agency should review internal policies to ensure that use of City Pair Program contract and non-contract air carriers results in overall cost savings.
	Agency may authorize use of non-contract airfares in three scenarios, including when a non-contract fare, if used, would result in a lower total trip cost to the government.
	Agency must consider (1) all direct costs, including per diem and actual transportation cost, and (2) indirect costs, including overtime and lost work time, when authorizing a method of transportation.
	Agency must assess risk associated with using non-contract airfares, which includes ensuring that the traveler reasonably anticipates using the ticket.
	Agency should configure the E-Gov Travel Service (ETS) to reflect an airfare selection policy that is designed to achieve the lowest total trip cost.
	Agency must book all travel airfare through appropriate ETS booking channels regardless of fare type.
<b><i>Rental Car (Passenger Vehicle) Requirements</i></b>	FTR 14-05, Jan. 16, 2014.
	Agency should review agency policy to verify that it is abundantly clear that all rental cars must be authorized only when in the best interest of the government.
	Agency should ensure travelers book rental car reservations through ETS where available or arrange car rentals through agency's Travel Management Center (TMC). No other methods may be used.
	Agency should ensure travelers are familiar with the Defense Travel Management Office (DTMO), U.S. Government Rental Car Agreement and encourage them to rent cars from participating vendors.
	Agency should educate travelers to decline additional insurance, such as collision damage waiver or theft insurance, which travelers generally may not be reimbursed for.
<b><i>Designation of Agency Senior Travel Officials</i></b>	FTR 14-08, May 13, 2014.
	Agencies are strongly encouraged to notify GSA's Office of Government-wide Policy of the name and contact information of the employee selected to be responsible on an agency-wide basis (i.e. the "Senior Travel Official") for ensuring efficient travel spending.
	Agencies should consider including certain major responsibilities as part of the Senior Travel Official position, such as researching best practices and recommending actions to improve efficiency and effectiveness of travel programs and directing and managing agency travel programs to obtain economy and efficiency.

Source: GAO analysis of General Services Administration documents. | GAO-16-657

# Appendix II: Comments from the U.S. General Services Administration



The Administrator

June 30, 2016

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the draft report entitled, *Federal Travel: Opportunities Exist to Improve Data and Information Sharing* (GAO-16-657). The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommends that the Administrator of General Services, as the chair of the Senior Travel Official Council (STOC), work with the STOC to:

- 1) Develop a travel data management approach, including common reporting formats that would provide GSA with more consistent travel cost data; and
- 2) Identify promising opportunities and implement leading practices to help agencies leverage their travel resources and implement travel cost-saving efforts.

GSA agrees with the findings and recommendations, and will take the following actions:

- Conduct a test program to determine the opportunities and barriers of creating a reliable, standardized data repository containing Government-wide travel spend data.
- As the chair of the STOC, establish a working group of STOC members to implement a process of documenting promising travel management and cost savings practices, which can be used by Senior Travel Officials at their agencies.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or Ms. Lisa Austin, Associate Administrator, Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs, at (202) 501-0563. Staff inquiries may be directed to Alexander Kurien, Deputy Associate Administrator, Office of Asset and Transportation Management. Mr. Kurien may be reached at (202) 969-4073.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Denise T. Roth".

Denise Turner Roth  
Administrator

cc: Michelle Sager, Director, Strategic Issues, GAO

1800 F Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20405-0002  
[www.gsa.gov](http://www.gsa.gov)

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# Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Michelle A. Sager, (202) 512-6806 or [sagerm@gao.gov](mailto:sagerm@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact name above, Tara Carter (Assistant Director) and Joseph Santiago (analyst-in-charge) supervised the development of this report. Jehan Chase, Kelvin Dawson, Keith Logan, Michael O'Neill, Laurel Plume, Silvia Porres-Hernandez, Steven Putansu, Wesley Sholtes, and Stewart Small made key contributions to this report.

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# Appendix IV: Accessible Data

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## Agency Comment Letter

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### Text of Appendix II: Comments from the U.S. General Services Administration

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Page 1

GSA  
1800 F Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20405-0002  
[www.gsa.gov](http://www.gsa.gov)  
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June 30, 2016  
The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

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If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or Ms. Lisa Austin, Associate Administrator, Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs, at (202) 501- 0563. Staff inquiries may be directed to Alexander Kurian, Deputy Associate Administrator, Office of Asset and Transportation Management. Mr. Kurian may be reached at (202) 969- 4073.

Sincerely,

Denise Turner Roth

Administrator

cc: Michelle Sager, Director, Strategic Issues, GAO

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