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## DECISION



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

FILE: B-18719

DATE: October 7, 1976

MATTER OF: Philip H. Postel - Relocation Expenses

DIGEST: Employee of National Weather Service (NWS), in June 1975, transported his household effects to Washington, D. C., while permanently assigned to duty on Johnston Island, had not been advised by an administrative officer either verbally or otherwise that his official station would be transferred to Richmond, Virginia, and NWS did not make determination to transfer employee until January 1976. Claimant is not entitled to reimbursement of expenses incurred in transporting household goods to Washington, D. C., prior to issuance of written travel orders.

This action is in response to a request by Mr. C. J. Terry, Certifying Officer, Seattle Field Finance Office, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, United States Department of Commerce, for an advance decision as to whether he may approve a travel voucher submitted by Mr. Philip H. Postel, an employee of the National Weather Service (NWS), for the costs incurred by him in moving his household effects in connection with a permanent change of official station.

The pertinent facts as reported by the certifying officer are as follows:

"Mr. Postel was recruited in Honolulu, Hawaii on December 8, 1974, for an assignment to Johnston Island. At the time of his recruitment he was residing in Honolulu with his wife, who stayed in Honolulu when Mr. Postel accepted his assignment to Johnston Island in bachelor status. During the time Mr. Postel was on Johnston Island his wife had accepted a position with her employer, a private concern, in the Washington, D. C. area. Since Mr. Postel was desirous of receiving a transfer to the Washington area

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at a future date, he elected to have his household effects moved at the time his wife moved in June of 1975. This was done at his own expense. In February, 1976, Mr. Postel was transferred from Johnston Island to Richmond, Virginia, and at that time he requested reimbursement for shipping household effects he had earlier shipped to Washington, D. C.

"Until Mr. Postel's transfer to Richmond, there had been no previous agreement or provision for transferring his household effects. Mr. Postel's claim is based upon the assumption that Chapter 2-1.5g(5)(f) of the Federal Travel Regulations (Prior return at employee's expense - reimbursement) applies fully to his circumstances. There are questions as to whether this regulation applies because there was no agreement made to return or ship household effects at the time they were actually shipped."

The claimant adds that there were not any NWS positions in the Pacific Region that were of any interest to him. He reports that soon after his transfer he and his wife agreed that they would like to live on the east coast. He felt there would be no problem for him to relocate in or near Washington, D. C., as he and his wife were already separated. She therefore applied for and was selected to fill a position in the office which her employer, a private concern, had recently opened in Washington, D. C. Mr. Postel states that, whenever an employee of the Weather Service desires to work at a new duty station, he must go through the bid/selection process.

Travel order dated January 20, 1976, authorized the permanent change of station for Mr. Postel and, with respect to the transportation of his household effects, the following special provision appears on the travel order:

"Household effects previously moved at employee's expense, to be reimbursed in accordance with NOAA Travel Handbook, Chapter 2-1.5g(5)(f); subject, however, to GAO clearance and approval."

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Paragraph 2-1.5g(5)(f), Federal Travel Regulations (FPMR 101-7) (May 1973), which we assume are similar to chapter 2-1.5g(5)(f) of NOAA Travel Handbook, provides, in pertinent part, as follows:

"(f) Prior return at employee's expense - reimbursement. There may be circumstances in which an employee elects to return his immediate family and his household goods or any part thereof at his own expense to any of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or a United States territory or possession when he is not eligible for such transportation under 2-1.5g(5). In such an instance after the employee becomes eligible for transportation at Government expense, he may be reimbursed for the proper expenses which he had previously paid. \* \* \*"

We have held in prior decisions that reimbursement of expenses incurred in anticipation of a transfer may be authorized when it is shown that the travel order subsequently issued to the employee includes authorization for the expenses on the basis of a previously existing administrative intention, clearly evident at the time the expenses were incurred by the employee. What actually constitutes a clear intention to transfer an employee depends on the circumstances in each case. 53 Comp. Gen. 836 (1974); 48 id. 395 (1968); and 41 id. 582 (1962). There is no authority under the FTR or our decisions to reimburse an employee for relocation expenses unless the transfer is authorized or actually effected and approved. Although the FTR does not expressly state what constitutes the authorization of a transfer, travel orders are generally required by agency regulation to be, or at least are generally recognized as being, the authorizing document. Thus, an employee cannot be assured that he will be reimbursed for relocation expenses incurred by him until he has received a travel order. 54 id. 995 (1975).

With respect to Mr. Postel's claim for reimbursement of the expenses incurred in transporting his household goods from Honolulu, Hawaii, to Washington, D.C., at the time his wife moved in June 1975, there is no evidence in the present record

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of an administrative intention to transfer the claimant to Washington, D.C., at the time these expenses were incurred. When the household effects were moved, the claimant had not been advised by an administrative officer, either verbally or otherwise, that his official station would be transferred to Richmond, Virginia, after completion of his tour of duty on Johnston Island. In fact, Mr. Postel states that whenever an employee of the NWS desires to change official duty stations, he must utilize the bid/selection process. The record indicates there was no agreement made to return or ship the household effects in question at the time they were actually shipped and that the NWS did not make a determination to transfer Mr. Postel to Richmond, Virginia, until January 1976, or approximately 7 months after the household effects had been moved. It appears that the employee transported his household effects purely as a matter of personal preference and convenience. Therefore, paragraph 2-1.5g(5)(f) of the FTR is not for application, and reimbursement is not authorized.

Accordingly, the voucher may not be certified for payment.

*R. Z. Kisten*  
Deputy Comptroller General  
of the United States