

Title 250 – General Manual

PART 406 – MEETINGS

406.0 Policy

- A. It is the policy of the Natural Resources Conservation Service that the number of employees attending a meeting or conference is held to the minimum necessary to ensure that NRCS is appropriately represented and that overall meeting objectives for the agency are achieved at the lowest cost to the public.
- B. All conferences, meetings and seminars called by NRCS will be held at the most cost-effective location (considering such factors as meals, lodging, transportation, and rental of conference rooms), all within the allotted per diem rate unless programmatic considerations dictate otherwise.
- C. State Conservationists, Directors of the Pacific Basin and Caribbean Areas, and NHQ Division Directors have authority to approve meetings not to exceed \$7,500.
- D. Any meeting for which NRCS costs are expected to exceed \$7,500 but not more than \$25,000 requires approval by the Deputy Chief for Management on Form SCS-FNM-72, Meeting Approval.
- E. Any meeting for which NRCS costs are expected to exceed \$25,000 requires advance concurrence by the Regional Conservationist or the Deputy Chief of the assigned area, on Form SCS-FNM-72, Meeting Approval, before submitting the form to the Financial Management Division, which will obtain final approval from the Department.
- F. NRCS officials who approve meetings are to consider carefully the need to hold a meeting and determine the minimum participation levels. This responsibility applies whether or not a formal written approval is required by this policy. These officials are to establish appropriate cost-review methods when exercising this authority.

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G. All requests for offsite meetings that exceed \$25,000 must be submitted quarterly to the Regional Conservationist or the Deputy Chief of the assigned area for advance concurrence before submitting the request to the Financial Management Division. The request for approval must be submitted at least 45 days before the beginning of a new quarter. Proposals must specifically justify the meeting, location, number of NRCS attendees, and costs (including travel, subsistence, and other anticipated expenses). Proposals not submitted within this quarterly review schedule for this will be prohibited unless specifically and separately approved with appropriate justification.

H. Any meeting, conference, or training seminar sponsored or co-sponsored by NRCS must conform to the Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act of 1990. This law specifically prohibits the use of Federal funds to sponsor or co-sponsor any conference, meeting, or training seminar in a hotel or motel that does not meet the law's fire protection requirement. A hotel or motel must have hard-wired, single-station smoke detectors installed in each guest room; facilities higher than three stories must have automatic sprinkler systems.

I. If a meeting of seven or more employees requires the payment of transportation expenses, a cost-benefit analysis must be conducted and kept on file. At a minimum, this analysis shall contain the name and duty location of each employee, the estimated total travel costs for each employee, other expected expenses (meeting room rental, etc.), and a justification for selecting the meeting site over at least three other reasonable sites.

406.1 Nondiscrimination

NRCS personnel may not accept invitations or request approval to attend any meeting called by an organization that practices discrimination in any form against any person or group.

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406.2 Meeting Facilities

A. NRCS policy requires a "barrier assessment" before selecting any meeting facility to host an NRCS meeting. Items considered are parking, walks, ramps, access/entrances, drinking fountains, restrooms, interior doors, and elevators. If any of these items appear to restrict access by persons with disabilities, the facility is to make reasonable accommodations. Final selection is based on the ability and willingness of a facility to make reasonable accommodations before the meeting. Where necessary, NRCS funds are legally available to provide portable ramps and other non-permanent accommodations to render a facility accessible for an NRCS meeting.

B. NRCS-sponsored meetings, conferences, seminars, and similar events, must use the following order of preference when selecting meeting facilities:

- (1) Local USDA facilities;
- (2) Other government facilities; and
- (3) Facilities outside the employees' official duty station.

C. Meetings or conferences where a majority of the attendees will be Washington, DC-based personnel must be held at a location within the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Only the Under Secretary of Natural Resources may authorize an exception to this rule.

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406.3 Accepting Funds from Sources Outside NRCS

A. Advance written approval by the Director, Human Resources Division (foreign), and by the Regional Employee Specialist for the region or the respective employee relations specialist servicing the center, institute, or NHQ Division (non-foreign) is required before an employee may agree to travel or other meeting attendance expenses. The outside source must provide a letter that clearly explains what it intends to provide. The request and the letter from the outside source will be sent to the Director, Human Resources Division (foreign), or to the employee relations specialist servicing the region, center, institute, or NHQ division (non-foreign). Employees may not accept any transportation or lodging arrangements that exceed the amounts or limits prescribed in the Federal Travel Regulations.

B. After obtaining approval to accept funds from an outside source, the Form AD-202, Travel Authorization, will be issued by the Financial Management Division to attend a foreign meeting and by the employee's State to attend a non-foreign meeting.

406.4 Meeting Approval Process

A. All requests for offsite meetings that exceed \$25,000 must be submitted quarterly through the Regional Conservationist or the Deputy Chief of the assigned area, to the Financial Management Division for obtaining Departmental approval.

B. A strong, written justification must be submitted stating the specific purpose of the meeting and reasons why the meeting is essential to the mission of NRCS.

406.5 How To Prepare Form SCS-FNM-72, Meeting Approval

A. Form SCS-FNM-72 should include the following:

- (1) The number of expected attendees paid for by NRCS;

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(2) The meeting site selected — with the cost comparison, including travel expenses, showing the justification of the site selected over at least three other reasonable site; and

(3) Additional expenses expected such as meeting rooms, guest speakers, special equipment rental, etc., to arrive at the total estimated cost of the meeting.

B. Standardized NRCS meeting costs are based on average meeting costs that incorporate expenses for transportation and an average number of per diem days for the type of meeting. (Note: If a passport is needed, Form SCS-FNM-72 must be submitted at least 90 days in advance of the travel.)

C. After the meeting is approved, notification is sent to the Regional Conservationist or the Deputy Chief of the assigned area, who is responsible for notifying employees. Each State should issue a type "C" Form AD-202, Travel Authorization, for their respective employees approved to attend the meeting.

D. Approved meeting requests and all related documentation is retained for 2 years by the Regional Office, the Deputy Chief, and the Financial Management Division for audit purposes.

406.6 Responsibility for the Meeting Approval Form Preparation

NRCS officials are responsible for preparing and submitting meeting approval forms when required. The following must account for total attendance and be approved by the respective position according to the monetary limits stated in Section 406.0.

A. National meetings: Regional Conservationists or Deputy Chief of the assigned area.

NOTE: A national meeting held at multiple locations at various times remains one national meeting for total cost and meeting-approval purposes. Use only one Meeting Approval form that combines all of the separate meetings.

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- B. Multiple State meetings: State Conservationist where meeting is to be held.
- C. State meetings: State Conservationist.
- D. Training courses (NEDC): Director, National Employee Development Center (see 406.9(e)).
- E. NHQ Training sessions: Deputy Chief of the assigned area.
- F. National Association of Conservation Districts annual conference: Regional Conservationists or Deputy Chief of the assigned area; for submission to the Financial Management Division.
- G. Soil and Water Conservation Society annual meeting: Regional Conservationists or Deputy Chief of the assigned area; for submission to Financial Management Division.
- H. State association meeting: State conservationist.

406.7 Travel Authorizations NHQ

Approval to hold a meeting does not constitute authority for attendees to travel. Separate type "C" travel authorizations will be prepared by each attendee's administrative office. Employees who hold type "A" travel authority (unlimited-open) need no further authority to travel to and from meetings unless foreign travel is involved. Travelers holding type "B" travel authority (limited-open) or type "N" (National) must have a type "C" travel authorization to travel to and from meetings.

406.8 Use of Actual Subsistence Travel Rates

A. Use of any actual subsistence travel rates for meetings called by NRCS is not authorized. Use of actual subsistence for meetings called by others is permitted within the delegated \$7,500 authority if the meeting is also held in a standard per diem locale. Refer to GM 130–400, Circular No. 2 (Part 400), "Delegations of Authority."

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B. Actual subsistence expense for a meeting called by others in a high rate per diem locale (key city) requires approval by the Regional Conservationist or Director, Financial Management Division to issue a special travel authorization. The authorization request, Form SCS-FNM-35, Request for Travel Authorization, must be submitted to the region or division.

406.9 Special Requirements for Select NRCS Meetings

A. Certain meetings require each NRCS allottee/allowance holder to submit a meeting approval form to FMD for the Chief's review regardless of cost. Currently, there are two such meetings:

(1) National Association of Conservation Districts annual conference; and

(2) Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) annual conference.

B. NEDC annual training courses: A detailed cost analysis and justification must be submitted quarterly to the Financial Management Division for approval of any training expected to exceed \$25,000.

(1) The estimated number of training courses for the quarter;

(2) The estimated number of total trainees to attend all courses; and

(3) Total estimated training costs (including total per diem, transportation, and other training cost; e.g., the trainer).

C. The annual NRCS Agency Business Meeting (State Conservationists meeting) is handled by special Chief's bulletin announcing approved attendance.

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WA406.9 Professional Society Meetings

A. All employees are encouraged to belong and participate in the activities of professional societies associated with their work.

Where the society or scientific meeting involved is closely related to the employee's professional activities and it is clear that benefits will result to the Service, consideration will be given to authorizing Service employees to attend on government time and at government expense.

Where the above conditions are met, the following guidelines will be used in authorizing attendance at professional and scientific meetings:

(1) Each employee will normally be authorized to attend such meetings on government time at the employee's expense. Employees should submit Form SCS-FNM-72 through their supervisor to the State Conservationist for approval. Upon receipt of the SCS-FNM-72, a request for approval will be forwarded to National Headquarters if required for final approval. Please allow at least 30 days for this process.

(2) Where the employee is presenting a professionally prepared paper where they are the principal author, the employee will normally be authorized to attend on government time and expense. Employees should submit Form SCS-FNM-72 through their supervisor and/or their respective Area Conservationist or Leadership Team Member to the State Conservationist for approval. Upon receipt of the SCS-FNM-72, a request for approval will be forwarded to National Headquarters if required for final approval. Please allow at least 30 days for this process.

406.10 Form SCS-FNM-72, Meeting Approval

[Click here for a copy of Form SCS-FNM-72](#)

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