



# vertiflite Commentary

## Unintended Consequences

By Mike Hirschberg, Executive Director

In October 2010, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) organized its 2010 Western Regions Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. GSA spent nearly \$823,000 (including a number of dubious expenses) on about 300 attendees. The full extent of the “excessive, wasteful” spending was revealed in an April 2, 2012 GSA Inspector General report. The GSA Administrator resigned over the lavish conference expenses, calling it “egregious,” and fired or placed on leave several GSA managers.

In response to this, the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate passed amendments on April 25 that were well intentioned, but, if enacted, would have severe negative consequences to organizations like AHS and our mission of advancing vertical flight technology.

The amendments were oversimplified in the media as restricting wasteful government spending, but the actual language would go far beyond that. In fact, the language would essentially limit federal agency personnel from attending more than one meeting held by an organization (either for-profit or not-for-profit) annually if there is any agency travel expense.

More than 200 U.S. government professionals attend the AHS Annual Forum each year, about 15% of the total attendees – and this is typical of many of our other U.S.-based technical specialists meetings. They attend AHS events because they depend on AHS for the latest information on breakthroughs in vertical flight technology from industry, academia and other

government agencies. They derive benefit to the U.S. government from the many formal and informal technical discussions and interactions that are easy to arrange when all the participants are gathered in one place.

AHS fully supports the intent of the U.S. Congress to engender greater transparency and accountability in government spending. There is no defense for exorbitant or wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars. However, while the amendments are designed to limit spending on *government-sponsored* conferences and travel expenses for federal employees, the actual language would have a chilling effect on government employees’ participation in *non-governmental* meetings and conferences as well.

AHS, along with more than 2000 other organizations, is advocating to Congress that the amendments be revised to allow U.S. federal government employees to attend educational and scientific conferences held by AHS, as well as by other associations and non-governmental organizations, without compromising the Congressional goal of enhanced federal accountability.

This is not the first time that AHS has had to deal with U.S. government travel restrictions. In 2007, during the height of the conflict in Iraq, the U.S. Army severely restricted non-essential travel by its personnel. Again, in 2011, an Army directive prohibited its employees from attending “conferences” (apparently targeted towards *government-sponsored* meetings) where the majority of speakers were U.S.

government personnel. And, as a result of the budget austerity measures, all government agencies are now minimizing travel by their employees, even to the point of overreaction.

AHS continues to make the Army and other U.S. government agencies aware of the tremendous benefits obtained from attending the Annual Forum and our technical specialists meetings. The AHS Annual Forum is truly the peak of the vertical flight technology calendar. It is the only place where attendees can participate with more than 1300 international attendees from industry, academia and government, sharing ideas on how to advance the state-of-the-art of vertical flight. The Annual Forum features 250 technical paper presentations, 40% of which have U.S. government authors/co-authors, in addition to special panels of government speakers, and a senior government keynote speaker. The Forum and AHS technical specialists meetings are prime venues for members of industry, government and academia to interact and share ideas.

Congress needs to act sensibly to revise the restrictive amendments. Government needs to reduce wasteful spending, but attendance by rotorcraft engineers, scientists and managers at vertical flight technical meetings is not wasteful—it is essential to continue to advance the state-of-the-art of vertical flight technology. The amendments as passed have significant unintended consequences that will be detrimental to AHS and the U.S. government.

