

# Impact of NASA Travel Procedures on Contractors

Belinda Wilkes  
Director  
Chandra X-ray Center

# Prime Directive to Maximize Chandra Science

Travel is an integral part of achieving this  
and a contractual requirement

# Contractor Travel

- Science meetings: to present science research via invited or contributed talks, and posters
- Regular, major conferences (e.g. AAS, HEAD, COSPAR, mission-run workshops): community support via exhibits, science and other presentations
- Software meetings: to present and collaborate on software development, algorithms, methods, scripting, languages etc. (e.g. ADASS)
- Engineering: instrument and calibration meetings (e.g. IACHEC, SPIE)
- Other travel: research and mission talks, colloquia, astronomical observing etc.

# NASA Procedures

## (Contractor View)

- Submit conference for NASA approval (NF 1784)
- Submit traveler names and justifications to NASA HQ or MSFC (for Chandra) well in advance
- *When relevant (e.g. AAS): submit estimated exhibit costs to NASA HQ (not including support personnel)*  
Names are entered into NCTS at HQ/MSFC
- Approval generally waits until ~30 days before meeting
- Travel plans: cannot be made (or risk cancellation costs) until approval is received

# Problems with process

- Conferences set talk and poster programs, exhibit plans, budgets etc. well in advance, BUT NASA personnel and exhibits cannot confirm attendance
- Personnel unable to plan for trip. Exhibit material, demos, talks, posters need to be planned and prepared months in advance
- Exhibit and personnel approvals are separate, but exhibit cannot be run without requisite personnel
- Costs Increase due to late registration, air fares, lack of conference hotel room rate availability etc.
- Mission-hosted conference approval is generally too late for effective planning and advertising

# Other Problems and Consequences

- Large cost in personnel time (=money) to submit lists, applications, updates, communication with conferences, changing travel plans, reports etc.
- Opaque approval process, with different NASA personnel for each conference, and lack of allowance for science meeting processes and schedules
- Apparently illogical decisions, for example:
  - Denial: CXC personnel from attending Boston AAS at cost of \$500 per person
  - Denial: Personnel invited to give talks at prestigious conferences
  - Cancellation: of approved trips resulting in cancellation costs
- NASA's leadership and international reputation are being damaged:
  - Lack of presence at major national/international meetings
  - Unreliability as personnel cancel talks/refuse invitations etc.
- Mission productivity reduced due to loss of:
  - Communications and discussions at meetings
  - Scientists performance and career paths impacted

# Suggestions

- NASA reassess need inclusion of contractors in travel and conference restrictions
- Waive approval requirement on contractually-required activities (e.g. colloquia, talks at conferences, observing)
- For Regular (e.g. AAS, HEAD, ADASS) conferences:
  - Baseline, pre-approved attendance costs for each contractor
  - Allow contractors to request increase as needed for specific conferences
- Move up schedule for conference approvals:
  - Travelers: several months before a conference
  - Conferences: 1 year before proposed dates
- Remove need for specific traveler names (domestic)