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**PREMIUM CLASS TRAVEL:
Policy and Procedures for FAS and FAS Sponsored Travel**

Signed by:



Deputy Administrator, Office of Administrative Operations



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1. PURPOSE

This directive supplements the [Agriculture Travel Regulation](#) (ATR) issued by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the [Federal Travel Regulation](#) (FTR) issued by the General Services Administration (GSA). This directive is intended to provide procedural interpretations and not grant additional benefits or adjust processes defined in the FTR or ATR. All provisions of this directive shall abide by applicable federal regulations.

This directive applies to travel of Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) employees, including those employed on a temporary or intermittent basis by FAS and individuals not employed by FAS but performing FAS sponsored travel or carrying out official activities of the agency.

This directive does not apply to:

- (a) FAS employees on loan or detail to another Department or agency or contractors, unless they are performing FAS sponsored travel; and,
- (b) Foreign Service Officers stationed outside the continental United States (OCONUS).

2. EFFECTIVE DATE

The policies and procedures contained in this directive are effective upon issuance.

3. SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS/CANCELLATIONS

This directive supersedes all prior policies issued by FAS regarding premium class travel.

4. PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES & AUTHORITIES

FAS Administrator: Approves all foreign and domestic travel for FAS employees and all FAS sponsored travel, except premium class travel or specific travel otherwise restricted by the ATR.

Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services (FFAS): Only General Officers (for purposes of this directive defined as the Under Secretary for

FFAS) may authorize premium class travel for FAS employees and FAS sponsored travel.

The authority to approve premium class travel may not be re-delegated. In the absence of the Under Secretary, only another USDA General Officer may approve premium class travel. Please refer to the ATR for a complete listing of General Officers.

Note: The authority of a General Officer resides with the position and those serving in an Acting in this capacity can approve premium class travel.

5. MANDATORY POLICY & REQUIRED PROCEDURES

5.1 General Policy

Coach class is the preferred method of travel. Authorization may be requested for the use of premium class travel (i.e., first class and business class), however, it must meet one or more of the following criteria as outlined in the ATR in order to be considered. FAS travelers are strongly encouraged to seek alternatives to premium class travel.

An authorization for premium class travel is not needed when Frequent Travel Benefits (FTB) are used to upgrade to premium class from unrestricted coach class contract fares (YCA) (See section 9).

A blanket travel authorization cannot be used for premium class travel.

5.2 Justification for Approval of Premium Class Travel

5.2.1 First Class Travel

First class travel is prohibitively expensive. Any requests for approval are strongly discouraged and will be denied except for extreme and urgent circumstances and only where such requests meet the following criteria:

- **No space is available in other than first class.** No space is available in business or coach class accommodations on any scheduled flight in time to accomplish the mission, which is urgent and cannot be postponed. Supporting documentation must be provided to document that business and coach class accommodations are not available (screen prints of available flights or certification from the travel management center are examples of acceptable documentation), explain why flight is so urgent, why the traveler's schedule cannot be adjusted, and/or why the meeting cannot be adjusted. A travel

schedule showing traveler reporting for duty within 10 hours of arrival or before is also required. Note: In some instances a carrier may place a traveler in first class seat at no additional cost when a through business class fare is booked. Such instances are permitted if business class fare is authorized.

- **Security Purposes.** Documentation must be provided explaining the security issue.
- **Agency Mission** is NOT an acceptable justification for first class travel requests.

5.2.2 Business Class Travel

Requests for business class travel must meet one of the following criteria:

- **No space is available in coach class accommodations.** No space is available in coach class accommodations on any scheduled flight in time to accomplish the mission, which is urgent and cannot be postponed. Supporting documentation must be provided to document that coach class accommodations are not available (screen prints of available flights or certification from the travel management center are examples of acceptable documentation), explain why flight is so urgent, why the traveler's schedule cannot be adjusted, and/or why the meeting cannot be adjusted.
- **Use of business class is required to accommodate a disability or special need.** In accordance with DM 4300-002, disability must be substantiated in writing by a medical authority and provided to the Performance Management, Benefits and Awards Branch of the Human Resources Division (HRD), Farm Service Agency. A certification from HRD must indicate other than coach travel is required. Documentation must be dated within the six months prior to the date of travel or must be a permanent disability. The documentation also needs to indicate that the disability cannot be accommodated using a cheaper alternative method (example: two coach seats). Note: Special need can be considered, with adequate documentation, for travel for medical treatment or emergency.
- **Security Purposes.** Documentation must be provided explaining the security issue.
- **Regularly scheduled flights only provide business class accommodations.** Documentation must be provided showing that no coach seating is offered on that flight and an alternative flight is

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not available. Screen prints of available flights or certification from the travel management center are examples of acceptable documentation.

- **Use of business class results in cost savings to the Government.** A cost comparison between business and coach class fares must accompany the request showing the cost savings to the Government (see Attachment A to be completed by the traveler). If the business class travel is approved, the traveler must provide a copy of the cost comparison to the International Travel Section to document the cost savings for reporting and auditing purposes.
- **Flights and connections in excess of 14 hours.** Where the origin and/or destination are outside the continental United States, and the scheduled flight time, including stopovers and change of planes, is in excess of 14 hours. Further, it must be documented that the traveler cannot take a rest period between flight segments or immediately following their arrival at destination. Justification for approval of business class travel under these criteria must be documented as follows:
 - a written justification of the need for premium class travel with the rational why a rest stop cannot be taken;
 - documentation of all flight times and stopovers; and,
 - a TDY schedule showing the traveler reporting for duty within 10 hours of arrival without a rest stop.

Note: If premium class travel is approved, travelers are not eligible for a rest stop en route or a rest period upon arrival at the TDY site.

Examples of rest stops: If the traveler arrives at the final destination on a Friday and Saturday is not a normal duty day, or you arrive on a Saturday and Sunday is not a normal duty day, the traveler has had a rest stop and "the 14-hour rule" cannot be used to justify business class travel. Additionally, if the traveler returns to his/her normal duty station from TDY and has at least 10 hours prior to reporting to work, the traveler cannot justify a request for business class travel on the return flight.

In rare circumstances where airline flight delays or rerouting causes a stop en route, such unavoidable occurrences are not sufficient reason to negate a premium class travel justification based on the originally planned itinerary.

- **Exceptional circumstances.** Full documentation of the exceptional circumstance must be provided. This justification includes the FTR justifications for foreign flight sanitation, payment from a non-federal source, and mission criteria. FAS anticipates very few instances where the mission critical criteria would be acceptable.

5.3 Alternatives to Premium Class Travel

Premium class travel is not an automatic entitlement to the traveler, even if the criteria in paragraphs 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 above are met. Managers and supervisors should give careful consideration to requests for premium class travel by weighing the benefits against the additional costs incurred. Employees or persons traveling internationally, and using government funds should consider one of the following alternatives instead of requesting premium class accommodations.

5.3.1 Rest Stop. In lieu of paragraph 5.2.2(f), the traveler should either plan to take a rest stop en route or take the first day after arrival as a rest day, whichever is most applicable. Both of these alternatives are generally less costly than premium class airfare. A rest stop should be taken at the approximate mid-point between on a direct route from the point of origin to the TDY destination.

5.3.2 Special Seating. Based on an employee's special physical need, the Deputy Administrator may approve the following alternatives to premium class travel:

- For a special physical need related to height, the employee may request bulk head or emergency row seating where additional legroom exists.
- For a special physical need related to weight, the employee may request two coach class seats.

When special seating requests are considered, the premium class travel request form is not required. However, in accordance with DM 4300-002, a disability must be substantiated in writing by a medical authority and provided to the Performance Management, Benefits and Awards Branch of the Human Resources Division (HRD), Farm Service Agency. A certification from HRD must indicate other than coach travel is required.

Following approval by a Deputy Administrator, the traveler or travel arranger must contact the TMC to arrange tickets for two coach seats or to determine if bulk head or emergency exit row seating can be reserved on the flight(s).

5.4 Unauthorized Use of Premium Class Travel

Premium class travel may not be used for:

- domestic trips, including Canada;
- rest and recuperation travel by Foreign Service personnel and family members; and,
- home leave travel by Foreign Service personnel and family members.

Premium class accommodations may only be requested for oceanic and foreign segments of trips. Domestic segments for connection to international flights shall be booked in coach class on a contract carrier to the gateway (interchange) point.

5.5 Procedures for Requesting Premium Class Travel

All requests for premium class travel (first and business) must follow the agency's established review and approval process as defined below, and must be submitted to the Office of the Administrator at least 5 work days prior to departure, when possible. If medical, disability or special need is cited, allow 5 additional work days to submit appropriate documents to HRD and for their decision to reach the traveler's supervisor.

5.5.1 Traveler and/or Travel Arranger. The traveler or the travel arranger may make reservations for premium class travel. However, under no circumstances are tickets to be requested or issued until a premium class travel approval is issued by a USDA General Officer. Only the TMC can issue premium class tickets.

For all premium class travel requests, the traveler or the travel arranger must prepare the following forms:

- Department of Agriculture Approval Form for Premium Class Travel;
- Employee Checklist for Premium Class Travel;
- A copy of the traveler's itinerary clearly denoting all flight segments for which premium class travel is requested; and,
- FAS Premium Class Travel Cost Comparison

The traveler must identify the appropriate criteria when requesting consideration for premium class travel and sign all forms. The flight segments information for which premium class accommodations are requested must be noted on the FAS Premium Class Travel Cost

Comparison. All supporting documentation must also be attached to the required forms.

Forward all required forms to the traveler's immediate supervisor, Division Director, and Deputy Administrator for approval. Following approval by the Deputy Administrator, a copy of forms a-d above are sent to ITS for verification and to be available for audits.

- 5.5.2 Final Approvals.** The traveler's supervisor, Division Director, and Deputy Administrator will consider the request and budget availability. Premium class travel is generally more costly than coach seating. If warranted, the Deputy Administrator forwards the request and all documentation to the Office of the Administrator (Attention: Chief of Staff) for review.

The Office of the Administrator will review the request and, if approved, forward the required forms to the Under Secretary, FFAS, for approval or disapproval.

After review and approval or disapproval by the Under Secretary, the premium class travel request is returned to the originating office via the Office of Administrator. If the Under Secretary has approved the premium class travel request, the Office of Administrator will add the electronic approval in GovTrip.

- 5.5.3 TMC.** If final approved is obtained from the Under Secretary, the traveler or the travel arranger must upload all premium class travel approval forms and justifications into GovTrip system. The traveler can then seek TMC assistance in securing premium class tickets by enabling the TMC assistance button in GovTrip and contacting SATO. SATO will issue the paper tickets or process the printing of the electronic tickets, as necessary.

5.6 Frequent Traveler Benefits (FTB)

It is the policy of the federal government that employees generally must use unrestricted coach class contract fares (YCA). However, you may upgrade your transportation class of service at your own expense. The legislation signed on December 28, 2001, (Section 1116 of the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 2002 (P.L. 107-107)) permits personal use of frequent flyer miles, upgrades, or access to carrier clubs or facilities acquired in connection with official travel obtained under terms available to the general public and **at no additional cost to the Government**. Therefore, you may use any frequent traveler benefits you have earned to upgrade your transportation class to premium service. The regulations governing upgrades to premium airline accommodations are at FTR

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§§ 301-10.123 and 301-10.124. The agency will not pay for any upgrades to premium class service unless the traveler meets one of the exceptions stated in the regulations and it is approved by an authorizing official.

For all official travel paid for by the federal government, the regulations governing the Fly America Act and use of contract carriers must be followed. When making travel arrangements, the traveler may not select an airline carrier based on whether it provides frequent traveler benefits. You must use the designated contract carrier.

Government fare class tickets may not be able to be upgraded to premium class tickets with the addition of FTBs by the traveler. Some airlines require full fare tickets when upgrading to premium class. The traveler or travel arrangers should not book, nor shall managers approve, full fare tickets (Y Class) in GovTrip. This applies to employees, their dependents and others whose travel is funded by the federal government. The employee should be aware that use of these benefits may have tax implications, dependent upon IRS determination. USDA and FAS are void of any liability related to an employee's personal use of the FTBs.

Should a traveler elect to use their FTBs to upgrade to premium class service for an official trip where the traveler would not otherwise be eligible under the above criteria, the TMC cannot book the reservation in premium class nor will ITS give approval to the TMC to do so. Any such upgrades must be arranged by the traveler directly with the airlines after the Government ticket is issued. ITS can only authorize tickets at the Government fare. Additionally, ITS is not able to assist the traveler in any use of FTBs, whether personal or in conjunction with official travel.

It is the responsibility of each traveler to communicate directly with an airline carrier to establish his/her frequent travel promotional benefits account. Any associated costs are to be paid by the traveler and are not a reimbursable expense.

Travelers will be personally responsible for any additional costs that may be incurred resulting from ticket changes to the use of FTBs. Travelers are also cautioned that exchanging Government issued tickets could cause problems that cannot be corrected by the TMC.

Example: A traveler is issued a YCA coach fare for official travel, which is a contractor carrier Government negotiated coach fare. The traveler would like to use FTBs to up-grade to business class. However, the YCA fare is not up-gradable to a business class fare. Only a full-fare, Y coach class fare can be up-graded to a business class fare. The traveler would need to be ticketed in the YCA fare and exchange their YCA fare with the airline and pay the difference in price between the YCA class and the Y class coach fare, plus use their FTBs to obtain an up-grade to business class. The cost of the up-grade to business class

using FTBs and cash is a negotiation between the traveler and the airline. Travelers and travel arrangers and travel approvers are cautioned that there should be no additional cost to the Government in those instances that travelers elect to use FTBs to up-grade a ticket to a higher class of service.

6. FURTHER INFORMATION

6.1 Definitions

(a) International Travel Section (ITS) – The office located in the Program Management Division, Office of Administrative Operations, that is responsible for the coordination of all passports and visas for official USDA travel and helps coordinate the travel requirements of FAS. ITS must complete a cost comparison for all premium class travel requests as needed for reports to the OCFO.

(b) Rest period - A break of more than 10 hours that is taken at approximately the mid-point in the overseas travel segment or upon arrival at the TDY location.

(c) Travel Management Center (TMC)

A private travel agency contracted with USDA through the General Services Administration to make travel arrangements and book commercial transportation (airline, train, rental cars, and hotels) for USDA employees traveling internationally and domestically on official business.

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6.2 FORMS

- Attachment A: Premium Class Travel Approval Form



Attachment A.pdf

- Attachment B: Premium Class Travel Check List



Attachment B.pdf

- Attachment C: Premium Class Travel Cost Comparison Form



Attachment C.pdf