



Photo by National Aeronautical and Space Administration

Position Summary. The Geological Society of America (GSA) endorses a United States visa system that supports international scientific exchange and cooperation. Government visa policy is especially important to the Earth sciences because

1. Earth science is inherently an international endeavor. It is not possible to understand Earth by studying only those parts of the planet that fall within the boundaries of a single country.
2. Progress in Earth science requires international field research, participation in international conferences, access to international research facilities, and other activities that involve international exchange and cooperation.
3. Delays in issuing visas to Earth scientists studying natural hazards —such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, and floods—can result in loss of life, loss of property, and loss of scientific opportunities. Earth scientists can help prevent some natural hazards from becoming natural disasters through international exchange and collaboration.

Purpose. This position statement summarizes (1) The Geological Society of America's consensus view on the importance of international scientific exchange; (2) concerns that visa processing delays impede and discourage international scientific cooperation; and (3) provides a communications tool for geoscientists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GSA believes the United States must have a visa system that supports international scientific exchange and cooperation. We support a system that protects national security while fostering a growing community of global experts. Scientific exchange and security are not mutually exclusive; to the contrary, they complement each other, and each is vital to the other.

The Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, and other partner agencies have worked closely with the scientific community in recent decades to make the visa process less cumbersome. We urge these additional steps to address some of our concerns.

- Address the current backlog of visa applications as expeditiously as possible by providing sufficient resources to the Department of State and its partner agencies to allow timely processing of visa applications. This action must be taken to prevent the world from again believing that the United States does not welcome international students, scholars, and scientists.
- The Department of State and its partner agencies should reduce repetitive reviews of international researchers and scholars who regularly travel to the United States to attend academic conferences and conduct research.
- Longer duration clearances and visas are needed. Protocols should be established to make treatment of applicants more consistent. Consular staff at posts abroad should receive regular training on protocols for initiating a Visa MANTIS review so that this screening tool can be used appropriately and consistently. (A Visa MANTIS review is a security review process

based on whether an applicant scientist is involved in any sensitive technologies on the Department of State Technology Alert List (TAL).) Additional training and guidance for consular staff can enhance security while simultaneously reducing the number of applications submitted for Visa MANTIS reviews, thereby alleviating potential delays.

- We recommend that the Department of State provide more transparency for visa applicants who experience delays and establish a special review process to address applications pending for more than 30 days.
- Periodically review and streamline the Technology Alert List (TAL) to include only subject areas that clearly have explicit implications for national security. The list identifies sensitive areas of science and technology in which exports of technology or information might be controlled. However, over the years, the TAL has been broadened, and it now restrains and inhibits legitimate areas of scientific research.
- Continue and expand ongoing efforts to renegotiate visa reciprocity agreements between the United States and key sending countries to extend the duration of visas each country grants students and scholars of the other and to permit multiple entries on a single visa. Improved reciprocity and allowing multiple entries would reduce the number of visa renewals that must be processed.
- Review the full range of visa-related policies and procedures put into place after 9/11 to enhance national security. An evaluation of their effectiveness is needed, and ineffective and unnecessary procedures should be revised or eliminated. Such a review could resolve these and other outstanding issues.
- Streamline the visa process for credentialed short-term visitors in science and technology fields. A non-immigrant visa applicant who is a legitimate graduate student, researcher, or professional in any field of science and technology, and whose application is supported by a qualified university, scientific body, or corporation should receive a determination on the individual's visa application within 30 days. Longer delays are very disruptive to scientific study, research, and collaborations.
- Consider legislation that would help to retain advanced international STEM graduates who are educated at U.S. universities.

RATIONALE

The United States' institutions of higher learning, corporations engaged in scientific research, and scientific organizations are the engines of innovation and advanced training. These entities power the country's research enterprise and contribute greatly to economic and national security. Moreover, they are important hubs of international collaboration and they play a vital role in facilitating educational and cultural interactions. Representatives of these organizations seeking to hire international talent are deeply concerned about the significant increase in delays experienced by many international students, scholars, and scientists who have applied for visas to work, study, conduct research, or attend conferences in this country.

Lengthy and unnecessary delays frustrate and discourage international students, scholars, and scientists from studying, working, and attending academic and scientific conferences here and abroad. This compromises our ability to attract international scientific talent and maintain scientific and economic leadership. As delays continue, highly qualified individuals are more likely to decide not to come to the United States, which damages the United States' ability to foster technological innovation and job creation.

Systems that maintain a nation's security while encouraging the entry and exchange of international students, scholars, and scientists bolsters scientific and economic competitiveness of every nation.

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ABOUT THE GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

The Geological Society of America (<https://www.geosociety.org>) is a scientific society with members from academia, government, and industry in more than 100 countries. Through its meetings, publications, and programs, GSA enhances the professional growth of its members and promotes the geosciences in the service of humankind. GSA encourages cooperative research among earth, life, planetary, and social scientists, fosters public dialogue on geoscience issues, and supports all levels of earth science education. Inquiries about GSA or this position statement should be directed to GSA's Director for Geoscience Policy and External Relations, Emily Orzechowski, at +1-303-357-1093 or eorzechowski@geosociety.org.