

9 February 2026

The Honorable Kristi Noem  
Secretary of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Noem,

The American Astronomical Society (AAS) – the major organization of professional astronomers in the United States, with over 8500 members – appreciates the opportunity to comment on the information collection request (OMB Control Number 1651-0111) that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Customs and Border Protection (CBP) plans to submit to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Our feedback focuses on the third of four proposed changes: “CBP is adding social media as a mandatory data element for an ESTA application... [which] will require ESTA applicants to provide their social media from the last 5 years.” The AAS has several concerns about this proposed change, all of which are motivated by our desire for the U.S. to maintain its position of global leadership in the astronomical sciences:

- **It is not in the U.S. national interest to create new barriers to attendance at scientific conferences.** The AAS hosts two large meetings every year, whose locations rotate among major American cities (the last four have been hosted in Madison, Wisconsin; National Harbor, Maryland; Anchorage, Alaska; and Phoenix, Arizona). Typically, 4-5% of the participants at these meetings are coming from abroad; their attendance expands the global reach of U.S. science and creates new opportunities for American researchers to pursue international scientific collaborations. A requirement to share five years of social media activity in every ESTA application would create a new disincentive and barrier to participation at scientific conferences in the U.S., thereby undermining their positive impacts.
- **It is not in the U.S. national interest to create new barriers to effective collaboration with our international partners in the construction and operation of federally funded observatories.** As telescopes have become more ambitious, complex, and expensive to build and operate, the ability to partner with friendly nations in their construction and operation has become an essential element of U.S. scientific leadership. Examples include the Hubble Space Telescope and James Webb Space Telescope, which the European Space Agency (ESA) partners with NASA in operating; the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA), which the European Southern Observatory (ESO), Chile, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan partner with NSF’s National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO) in operating; the Gemini Observatory, which Chile and South Korea partner with NSF’s National Optical-Infrared Astronomy Research Laboratory (NOIRLab) in operating; and the U.S. Extremely Large Telescope (US-ELT) project, whose partners include Australian, Israeli, and Japanese institutions. Including the countries that are members, associate members, or in cooperation agreements with ESA and ESO, *33 of the 36 most populous Visa Waiver Program countries are*



*partnering with the U.S. in operating our federally funded telescopes.*<sup>1</sup> New barriers to travel between these countries and ours will undermine the effectiveness of some of our most critically important scientific partnerships.

- **It is not in the U.S. national interest to invite the introduction of reciprocal barriers to travel by U.S. scientists to Visa Waiver Program countries.** American astronomers have long enjoyed the benefits of open, competitive access to telescopes operated by the national science agencies of friendly nations, and have maintained U.S. global leadership in part through international collaborations that are sustained by our own international travel. The imposition of a new ESTA social media requirement invites the imposition of new social media requirements on U.S. citizens, which could negatively impact American scientists' ability to sustain U.S. global leadership. Indeed, the prospect of other countries' immigration authorities policing the social media activity of Americans is in tension with Executive Order 14161<sup>2</sup> – identified as the motivation for the new CBP requirement – which requires that DHS work with other agencies to “protect the American people from the actions of foreign nationals who have undermined or seek to undermine the fundamental constitutional rights of the American people, including, but not limited to, our Citizens' rights to freedom of speech.”

Given the above concerns, in response to the four specific questions on which feedback is requested: the AAS views social media activity as having no practical utility in the assessment of ESTA applicants who want to visit the U.S. to attend a conference, support the operations of a federally funded observatory, or engage in collaborative research; this information should not become a mandatory data element; and DHS and OMB are urged also to consider the burden that is likely to be created by the reciprocal imposition of social media requirements on U.S. citizens.

We thank you for your consideration of this feedback, and would welcome any questions you might have about it.

Sincerely,

Dara Norman, PhD  
President, American Astronomical Society

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<sup>1</sup> In alphabetical order, these 33 countries are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/30/2025-02009/protecting-the-united-states-from-foreign-terrorists-and-other-national-security-and-public-safety>