



Tips for Taking Action

In a democracy like ours, national leaders make decisions on our behalf. However, our leaders can't represent our views and values unless we tell them what they are. This is why it is important to tell your U.S. representative and senators where you stand on conservation issues. Lending your voice to topics like outdoor access, urban sprawl, population growth, sustainable development, and habitat conservation can help shape the way decision-makers create and implement policies and programs.

Here are tips for getting your voice heard.

1. Take down names and numbers:

The easiest way to find out who your senators and representative are is to look it up on the Internet. You can use the advocacy section of the League's web site to find this information. Go to www.iwla.org and click on the "Action Center" button in the bottom right corner. The League's Action Center also has information on recent developments in conservation policy and current legislation.

In addition to the League's web site, both the House of Representatives and the Senate have web sites that let you search by zip code or state to locate your elected officials.

- House of Representatives – www.house.gov
- Senate – www.senate.gov

Most legislators also have individual web sites. You can access those through the main House and Senate web sites listed above. Individual web sites will usually have a page for contact information, including mailing addresses, fax numbers, and e-mail addresses or web forms for submitting comments on-line.

If you don't have Internet access, contact your state election board or secretary of state's office. Telephone numbers for these state offices should be listed in the government section or blue pages of your local phone book. Your local library or newspaper is also a good source of information.

2. Decide what action to take:

There are no concrete rules for what type of contact (letter, e-mail, fax, phone call, meeting) will be most effective for getting your message across. After a few contacts, you'll get a feel for what works best for your legislators and their staff. However, there are a few loose guidelines to keep in mind while you are getting started.

- Office visits can make a big impression. Taking the time to actually set up a meeting in a local office (or in Washington, DC, if you plan to travel there) lets your legislators know that you feel strongly enough to take time out of your busy life to meet with them.
- Personalized letters are also good tools, for the same reason. You took the time to write your own letter (not a form letter). Mailed letters are good if you have several days to send your message. Otherwise, a faxed or e-mailed version works well if you're time-constrained. If you fax or e-mail your letter, try to send it to a specific staffer; it's more likely to get personal attention that way.
- Phone calls are best when you can talk to a specific person. Often you'll be referred to voicemail. That's okay – staffers are busy people too. Leave only a brief message and ask to be called back. If you miss the staffer several times, go ahead and leave them your full message or try e-mail. As you build a relationship with the office, you'll be better able to figure out the most effective way of getting your message through.
- Unless you know your Representative or Senator personally, don't expect to meet or talk with them directly. Again, just like you, they are busy and their schedules fill up fast. Once you've established a relationship with a staffer, ask to be bumped up to meet or speak with the legislator personally.
- Be conscious of the number of your contacts and their timing. Over contacting an office can be just as counterproductive as not contacting them at all. Look for key opportunities like before and/or after an important vote or on special action days – like Earth Day, World Population Day, the opening of deer season, etc.

3. Make a phone call:

You can call your Senators and Representative via the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121. Before you call, prepare some brief notes for yourself. Include the following:

- Why you are calling – is it about a general issue or specific legislation? If it's about legislation, have the bill title and number (e.g. H.R. 2372 or S. 1287).
- Are you calling to express support for or opposition to a policy decision or bill?
- What are your two or three strongest arguments? Keep this part simple and to the point.

- What do you want your legislator to do? Cast a yes or no vote? Make a statement? Ask for more research? Hold a hearing?

Now that you have your message prepared, you are ready to make the phone call. Call the Capitol Switchboard and ask for the office of your legislator. You will be connected to his or her office. Once you are connected, ask for the staff person who deals with the issue area you are calling about (fisheries, international population programs, wetland protection, energy, transportation, trade, etc.) Don't expect to talk to your representative or senator personally, especially if it's your first time calling. Legislators are often in session, at hearings or other meetings – doing the business of governance. Be sure to note the name of the staff person with whom you speak. When you call back in the future, try to talk to the same person each time. This will help you build a relationship.

Always be polite and respectful. If you feel you are not getting the help you need, call back and ask to speak with another staff person. At the end of your call, be sure to thank the staff person for his or her time. Once you've built up a relationship with the staff person, ask if you can speak to your representative or senator directly.

You can also call a Senator or Representative's district office. Contact information for these is usually listed on the official web page – which you can get to through the main House and Senate web sites listed above. Or, you can simply ask for this information when you call their Washington, DC, office. Calling both offices is a good idea to make sure your message gets through.

4. Schedule a visit:

Preparing for an office visit is very similar to preparing for a phone call. The difference is you'll probably be visiting an office in your district or state rather than contacting the Washington, DC, office. However, if you ever do come to Washington, visiting your legislators is a great way to combine taking action with sightseeing!

Either way, you'll need to find out where your legislator's offices are located. You can use the web sites listed above or call your legislator's Washington, DC, office (through the Capitol Switchboard) and ask. Also, ask for the name and contact information of the staffer working on your issue.

Once you have a staff person's name, ask to schedule an appointment. You may be asked to submit a written request for a meeting.

When preparing for your meeting, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Be prepared – just like with the steps listed above for making a phone call, know why you are meeting, what you are asking, and what your two or three key points are.
- Bring support materials – a fact sheet, a list of talking points, a copy of a relevant newspaper article are all good things to have on hand as a reference. You can also leave materials with the staffer for him/her to review later. Don't overload the

staffer with too many materials, though. A packet with 2-3 pages of background is much more likely to get read than piles of reports.

- Bring a friend – there is strength in numbers and having someone come along might make you more comfortable.
- Be respectful – Be on time. Be friendly. Even if you are arguing a tough point or the staffer disagrees with you, remember, building a relationship is key. You want to come back again later! Agree to disagree, and take it as an opportunity to continue to educate the office on your issues. If you have a particularly tough time, chalk it up to experience and deal with someone different in the future.
- Dress appropriately – approach it like a business meeting or job interview. You don't have to be overly formal, but don't be casual.
- Expect to meet with a staffer - not the Representative or Senator (especially your first few times out). Even if your legislator is back home from Washington, DC – their schedules fill up quickly and staff routinely handles constituent meetings.
- Expect the unexpected – your meeting may last 15 minutes or an hour, depending on staff schedules and familiarity with your issue. If you are asked something you don't know – don't panic – say you'll find out. This is one more opportunity to follow-up. Give yourself a break if things do not go perfectly. The important thing is that you are doing something!
- Follow up – send a quick thank you note or e-mail after your meeting. This is another chance to restate your case; but keep it simple. The main point is to say thank you.

5. Write a letter:

You can send a letter through the postal service, by fax, or by e-mail. No matter how you send your letter, try to send it to a specific person. If time is an issue, consider sending your letter by fax or e-mail. Faxes are a little more formal and attention getting because – just like at your office or home – e-mail inboxes can overflow with messages. You can usually get personal e-mail addresses by calling the Washington, DC, or district offices.

For written correspondences, address your letter:

To a Senator:

The Honorable (Full Name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

To a Representative:

The Honorable (Full Name)
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Here are some basic tips for writing a persuasive letter:

- Keep it short and simple. Limit your letter to one page and one issue.
- Identify yourself and the issue. In the first paragraph of your letter, state who you are and what issue you are writing about. If you are referring to a specific bill, identify it by number.
- Focus on your main points. Choose the two or three strongest points to support your argument and state them clearly. Too much information can distract from your position and dilute your main message.
- Make it personal. Tell your legislator why this particular issue is important to you. Explain how you, your family, or your community is affected. Find some kind of connection to the legislator. Do you both hunt or fish? Did you contribute to his or her campaign? Did you grow up in the same hometown or go to the same school?
- Ask for a reply. Include your name and address on both your letter and envelope.
- Trust your voice. Be polite and respectful, but take a firm position. Be confident in your understanding of the issue and remember that the legislator may know less than you.
- Follow up. After a vote or key decision, send a thank you if your legislator acted the way you wanted. If not, respectfully let them know you are disappointed and will be closely watching their future actions.

The most important thing to remember is doing something is better than doing nothing. Legislators want to hear from you! They need to know what the people from their district or state are thinking. Relatively few people take the time to send a personal message to their elected officials. This means that when you talk, you are very likely to be taken seriously. And, if you can get a few friends to send the same message, you can really make a difference. Sometimes a handful of phone calls or letters from constituents are the deciding factors in the way a legislator acts and votes. So, go make your voice heard!

Sources:

Capitol Advantage. "Congress at your Fingertips". Alpha Version, 108th Congress, 2nd Session 2004.
Sierra Club. www.sierraclub.org. "Tips for Effective Activism". June 2004.