



Meeting with Elected Officials

Nothing impresses Members of Congress as much as citizens willing to make a personal visit. Whether it's to discuss local issues or national topics, individuals or groups who make the effort to speak their mind in person are worth platoons of lobbyists in Washington.

You don't have to travel to Washington to meet with your congressional representatives, because they come home almost every weekend. And there are other, longer designated "work periods" during national holidays, such as the Fourth of July, Easter, Memorial Day and Labor Day. Your Member of Congress most likely has several district or state offices, and many elected officials also hold town meetings to solicit constituent views. These are wonderful opportunities for you to go in, as an individual or representing a group, and express your views.

Lobbying is a distinctly personal activity. There is no "right" way to do it. There are some guidelines that everyone follows, but trust your own personal style when meeting with decision makers. Your visit should accomplish both short-term and long-term goals. Short-term goals include persuading your representative or senator to vote on the pro-environmental side of an issue, cosponsor a bill, etc. Long-term goals include developing a relationship with your elected officials and their staff and educating them on larger issues. Never discount the importance of staff — their job is to evaluate policy issues and advise their boss on the position to take.

When you meet with elected officials, as an individual or a group, you take with you two messages. The first is substantive: "Please cosponsor HR 2666, the acid rain bill; please vote for increased appropriations for wildlife refuges." The second is political and you deliver that message by simply walking through the door. *That here are people in the district willing to take the time to present their views in person is a very powerful message* and one that lobbyists here in Washington cannot hope to match, no matter how knowledgeable on the technical minutiae of an issue. While it helps to know the substance of an issue, particularly when talking about local or state concerns, constituents are not expected to know every detail of a national piece of legislation. It's always OK to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out and get back to you."

Getting an Appointment

1. Call the district or state office and request a meeting during the next recess break when your Member is at home. Many Members of Congress are in the district Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday as well.
2. The appointment secretary will want to know what the meeting is about and who will attend. Limit your agenda to only a couple of things, or better yet, one topic.
3. Polite but firm persistence, pursued through regular contact with the district office, is **essential**. If you can't get an appointment during the upcoming recess, express your disappointment — and immediately request a firm commitment for the next time the Member of Congress is back home.
4. Look for district office listings in the white pages under U.S. Government, call your representative's Washington, D.C., office or ask you Audubon Policy office, audubonaction@audubon.org, 202-861-2242 ext. 3036. You can telephone your lawmakers through the U.S. Capitol switchboard: 202-224-3121.

In the meantime, the other message – the political message – gets delivered.

PLANNING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING

Small groups are generally best. You may want to have at least one spokesperson represent several organizations to strengthen the impression that you represent a number of constituents. Consider putting together a coalition with representatives from other local groups or Audubon chapters in the area.

Before the meetings, get together and decide who will say what. Don't expect a lot of time with your representative or senator. Ask the staff in advance how much time you'll have and be sure to cover your key points early on. Ask for specific action. "Senator, we'd like you to cosponsor S 39"; "Congresswoman, we'd like you to sign the Global Warming Dear Colleague letter circulated by Congressman Smith."

Try and find a local angle on national or regional issues. How does this issue affect your community? Divide up your agenda so that everyone in your group has an opportunity to speak. Remind everyone to begin and end by focusing on the specific action you'd like your representative or senator to take: "Senator, we hope you'll support efforts to protect wetlands through the Clean Water Act"; "Congresswoman, what is your position on amendments to weaken the Endangered Species Act?"

Hold a pre-meeting meeting. This helps get everyone there on time – and prepare for the most effective discussion. If possible, prepare a brief fact sheet to leave with the congressman. List the names, addresses, and phone number of each person in your group. Then summarize the agenda items, highlighting the specific action requests.

MEETING ETIQUETTE

Be on time, dress formally and be polite. Never threaten your Member of Congress and never insult other elected officials.

Be sure to introduce yourselves at the outset of the meeting. Have your leader then give a brief introduction

about Audubon, your local chapter, or your local coalition. State your reasons for seeking the meeting. Don't overstay your welcome. Ask how long the staff person or lawmaker has to meet. Remember their schedules are hectic and often unpredictable. Be flexible.

Cover your key points thoroughly and early. If the official is enjoying the meeting and lets it run over, fine. But be prepared to complete your agenda in the time allotted. Beware, also, of Members who try to waste your time talking about the weather, common acquaintances, etc. Politely, but firmly, get him or her back on track.

"ENDLESS PRESSURE, ENDLESSLY APPLIED"

Follow-up with a thank you letter, and provide any information you promised during the meeting. Use these opportunities to continue to build a relationship with your elected official, and his or her staff. And don't be discouraged if you don't see eye to eye with your representative on every issue; there's always another piece of legislation down the road that he or she may be helpful on. If you don't get the answer you want, keep trying. Persistence is the key.

Audubon staff can benefit from what you learned in your meeting. Remember that these kinds of visits provide an opportunity to gather information as well as air your point of view. So let your policy staff know how the meeting went. You may be able to furnish valuable lobbying information.

Grassroots power has saved many wild places, helped pass important pollution control laws, and ensured adequate resources for the protection of wildlife over the objections of the big money lobbies here in Washington. You have what they can never match. You have grassroots clout. So, if you really care about an issue, don't let your representative leave home without hearing your opinion.

For more information about setting up a meeting with your elected officials or to report on a meeting, contact the Audubon D.C. Policy office at 202-861-2242 ext. 3036, or your Audubon state office.